

# AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE CONTEMPORARY ERA

ALFREDO GONZÁLEZ-RUIBAL



# An Archaeology of the Contemporary Era

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*An Archaeology of the Contemporary Era* approaches the contemporary age, between the late nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, as an archaeological period defined by specific material processes. It reflects on the theory and practice of the archaeology of the contemporary past from epistemological, political, ethical and aesthetic viewpoints, and characterises the present based on archaeological traces from the spatial, temporal and material excesses that define it. The materiality of our era, the book argues, and particularly its ruins and rubbish, reveals something profound, original and disturbing about humanity.

This is the first attempt at describing the contemporary era from an archaeological point of view. Global in scope, the book brings together case studies from every continent and considers sources from peripheral and rarely considered traditions, meanwhile engaging in an interdisciplinary dialogue with philosophy, anthropology, history and geography.

*An Archaeology of the Contemporary Era* will be essential reading for students and practitioners of the archaeology of the contemporary past, historical archaeology and archaeological theory. It will also be of interest to anybody concerned with globalisation, modernity and the Anthropocene.

**Alfredo González-Ruibal** is a researcher with the Institute of Heritage Sciences of the Spanish National Research Council. His research focuses on the archaeology of the contemporary past, and particularly on the dark side of modernity: war, dictatorship, predatory capitalism and colonialism. He has conducted fieldwork in Spain, Brazil, Ethiopia, Equatorial Guinea and Somaliland.



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# An Archaeology of the Contemporary Era

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To my father, Constantino, in memoriam  
To my daughter, Julia



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and criticism that have been extremely helpful in improving the text. Ana, my wife, has explored with me many ruins of the contemporary era.

This book is dedicated to Julia, my daughter, with the hope that she will be able to live in a different, less destructive era. It is also dedicated to the memory of my father, Constantino, who did live in another era which I barely experienced, but which I learnt to love and fear through him. I conducted my first research on contemporary archaeology with him. Together with my brother Bruno, we explored the ruins of a world that my father had known very well and that for us was so close and so remote at the same time. One of our favourite poets, Luis Rosales, wrote “Death does not interrupt anything.” As an archaeologist, I can agree: the past is alive with us in the present. But I am not just an archaeologist. The sense of loss and nostalgia that is evident in some of the forthcoming pages is a form of mourning for my father and for the vanished world he stood for.

# Introduction

THE AIM OF this book is to offer an archaeological exploration of the contemporary era, which is understood here as an archaeological period starting around the turn of the twentieth century and characterised by specific material phenomena. It has been argued that the potential of contemporary archaeology lies not so much in understanding our present age as just another archaeological phase, but in rethinking archaeological practice and theory. I do not see both things as incompatible: what I will try to do in this book is to show that by examining our present time as another archaeological period, we can simultaneously reflect on the methodological and theoretical foundations of our discipline and contribute to a different understanding of the contemporary world.

I start from the idea that the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which are characterised by an excessive and highly destructive form of modernity, are unique in the history of humankind and that this uniqueness has to be accounted for in material terms. It is not a completely new age: in fact, it is an evolved (and more lethal) version of something that started around the fifteenth century and that is commonly known as modernity. However, the scale of global transformation is indeed without parallel in history and this transformation is leaving indelible archaeological traces all over the world. An archaeology of the contemporary era is the study of these traces—ruins, abandoned places, devastated landscapes, rubbish—which taken together define a particular archaeological assemblage. Archaeology is a discipline that is particularly well situated to define and understand this new era due to the destructive character of supermodernity and the fact that archaeology works best when it works with ruination, interruptions and collapse. In fact, I would argue that archaeology is not best characterised as the study of the past (there are other disciplines that study it, such as history) or of things (a matter of concern for a variety of social scientists) and not even things in the past. Archaeology studies archaeological phenomena.

This book, then, is an attempt to examine the contemporary era and archaeology together. Thus, I explore archaeologically some of the main issues and challenges of the contemporary world and at the same time ask in which way archaeology can contribute to a different understanding of those issues. When I interrogate epistemology and aesthetics, for example, my questions are: What is the nature of the archaeological knowledge of the contemporary world? What kind of poetics do we need to make it manifest? Other key themes of this book—time, space and materiality—have been the target of sociologists and philosophers of modernity for decades, but they are also crucial in the definition of archaeology.

What I will try to do in the following pages is to follow the path of many others who have understood modernity as a problem, from Karl Marx to Zygmunt Bauman. Geographers, philosophers and sociologists have strived to understand what makes our world so different to others and they have done so from a critical point of view, to expose its dangers and iniquities. I believe that, with its limitations, but also with an original perspective, archaeology can join the fields that have tackled the question of modernity. Unlike in other archaeologies of

the contemporary, some effort will be spent here reflecting on the relevance of an archaeological approach to the present, but I would not consider this a waste of time—rather a form of knowledge production in its own.

These are some of the ambitions of the present work: to characterise supermodernity as an archaeological era, to reflect on the nature of archaeology and its contribution to the knowledge of the contemporary world, and to allow archaeology to engage in a dialogue with other disciplines not as a subaltern, but as an equal. There is a fourth ambition: to provincialise supermodernity. The archaeology of the contemporary past has been described as the archaeology of us, as opposed to the archaeology of the (prehistoric, historic, or ethnographic) Other. This “us” is predominately white and Euro-American, that is, the “us” that overwhelmingly predominates in academia. Yet this us is becoming a minority in the global world, in demographic and cultural terms. The expansion of the archaeology of the contemporary past to countries like Iran or Brazil is enriching the field and making it more complex and diverse. This book is strongly concerned with those who do not belong to the hegemonic us.

This perspective has to do with my professional experience as an archaeologist who has worked in the global South. Much of my reflection comes from experiences in the field in Spain, Brazil, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia and Somaliland. But it also has to do with my social experience as a citizen from a southern European country—one which has gone through the collapse of traditional communities, a civil war, two dictatorships and a devastating economic crisis during the last hundred years. What I propose, then, is an archaeology of the contemporary era from the South. For this, I mean an archaeology interested in the margins of the world (spatial, material, economic and political). To do an archaeology *from* the South should not be mistaken for a regional archaeology—an archaeology *of* the South. I intend to characterise global supermodernity taking its interstices and peripheries very seriously. These are in Africa and South America, but also in Wales and Detroit.

There is more than political and ethical rhetoric in this approach. Expanding the field to include other experiences of modernity means offering a more precise and complex portrait of our times. It means incorporating other temporalities and other materialities that are systematically marginalised in discourses on the modern. This book understands that a hut of mud and straw is as much a part of the supermodern world as a skyscraper, even if the latter is a direct product of modernity and the former is not. In fact, the supermodern world is one of complex temporalities: troubles in the Middle East are rooted in religious and cultural conflicts that are millennia old, while indigenous communities all over the world challenge the hegemonic time of the West. Archaeology is regularly confronted with multiple temporalities, as they manifest themselves in the material record.

This work is inevitably a journey into the dark side of the contemporary world. In that, I follow the path opened by decolonial theory in Latin America. It scrutinises the negative effects of modernity, by looking at the ruination brought about by war, totalitarianism, predatory capitalism, colonialism and mass migration. There are, of course, other modernities, more hopeful and kind, and they are a legitimate and exciting subject of study by archaeologists. I feel, however, that to portray the dark side of our age is an urgent task and one in which archaeology can make a decisive contribution.

## Outline of the book

This book is divided into two parts. The first part deals with theoretical and methodological issues that are of relevance for contemporary archaeology and beyond, and the second

proposes an archaeological outline of the contemporary era, focusing on time, space and materiality. Chapter 1 begins with an overview of the archaeology of the contemporary past, with a specific emphasis on some forgotten genealogies. It follows with an analysis of the concepts that have been used in social theory to define the contemporary era (late modernity, postmodernity, the Anthropocene) and then argues for the use of supermodernity. Supermodernity, of course, implies that modernity is a relevant concept in the first place: it is reclaimed here from certain oblivion in archaeology and anthropology. Yet accepting terms that have been proposed in other disciplines to define an era does not mean that the chronological framework and the elements that characterise such an era are accepted wholesale: instead, a specific archaeological definition of supermodernity is defended, one in which things call the tune and, even more important than things, the archaeological record: abandoned, wasted, ruined, or buried things. The chapter ends with a reflection on the kind of knowledge that is produced by the archaeology of the contemporary past. Contemporary archaeologists face the challenge of dealing with a period of which much is already known or knowable by other means and sources, which are often less ambiguous than archaeology. So what do we need the discipline for? I suggest that archaeology can produce knowledge about both the unknown (from crimes against humanity to unconscious everyday behaviour) and what is already known. The latter involves epistemic operations that can be better understood under the concepts of anamnesis and anagnorisis.

Chapter 2 offers a characterisation of the archaeological record of the contemporary era. The emphasis here is on ruins, which are the most conspicuous form of archaeological remains of our age. I propose a review of the different kinds of modern ruins according to the nature of the processes that produce them: systemic collapse, systemic operation, autophagy, failure and catastrophe. By systemic collapse, I refer to large-scale, irreversible changes in sociotechnical systems. I examine three of the main collapses of the contemporary era: the genocide of indigenous peoples, the annihilation of the remnants of the *Ancien Régime*, and the end of peasant societies. All these leave an indelible trace, a horizon of destruction that can be documented archaeologically. Other ruins, however, are related to the normal functioning of our age; this is the case with the debris produced by systemic operations (economic, political, social) and the self-cannibalising tendencies of modernity. Other ruins, instead, are provoked by failures (a plane crash, a meltdown) or by “natural” catastrophes, which are in fact the result of disastrous combinations of human and non-human agents. The chapter ends with a reflection on destruction beyond ruination, the total devastation that has been so often unleashed upon the world during the last hundred years, and whose material traces are best represented by ash and rubble.

The three chapters that follow explore the political effects of contemporary archaeology, its ethical framework and the rhetoric that it deploys to manifest the past. Chapter 3 offers on the one hand, a critique of prevailing archaeological politics and, on the other, suggestions for repoliticising the discipline in a way that is productive both socially and epistemologically. It is possible to perceive in contemporary archaeology many of the problems that plague the relationship between archaeology and politics generally, and that can be identified with multivocality, multiculturalism, the triumph of the local, the celebration of choice, and the political aloofness of neomaterialism. Against this soft politics, I propose five operations for repoliticising contemporary archaeology, which are compounded under the terms “dis-sensus”, “disclosure”, “defamiliarisation”, “desublimation” and “descent”.

Chapter 4 approaches ethics, one of the issues that have attracted more attention in the social sciences in recent years. Here I scrutinise the metapolitics that lie beneath the hegemony of ethics and then explore three main themes which link ethics with politics: temporality, affect and materiality. I first ask which are the ethical responsibilities acquired

by archaeologists dealing with the most recent past and more particularly what are the ethical responsibilities of post-witnessing. Then I reflect on how current non-historicist notions of archaeology and non-Western temporalities invalidate the distinction between past and present and create new ethical dilemmas and forms of engagement. Finally, I focus on affects and ethics in my attempt to reclaim two concepts that have been long fallen into disrepute: resentment and nostalgia. They both challenge unilinear concepts of time and demand an expansion of moral responsibilities beyond the present.

Chapter 5 addresses the poetics of archaeology. Archaeologists have been increasingly concerned with aesthetics, rhetoric and art during the last two decades. This interest is particularly obvious in the case of contemporary archaeology and has led to discussions regarding the political and epistemological problems of aestheticised knowledge—for example, with the use of photography. I deal with these debates and then set out to explore the potential of Jacques Rancière's philosophy of aesthetics. His description of the aesthetic regime of art allows me to reflect on archaeology's own regime and the similarities between the two. I defend that both work aesthetically through parataxis—the juxtaposition of apparently unrelated phenomena, objects, or ideas—only that art creates parataxes and contemporary archaeology documents them as it finds them in the world. I then resort to Rancière's poetics of knowledge to propose a new rhetoric for archaeology—one based on materiality, ellipsis and silence—which is particularly well suited to manifest the lives of the victims of history.

Chapter 6 opens the second part of the book, the archaeological characterisation of supermodernity, with an examination of temporal excess. Such excess is manifested in an overrepresentation of the present over all other times—the success of contemporary archaeology has to be related with this. Excess is also represented by increasing acceleration as it has been so often pointed out. Yet supermodernity has often led to more radical temporal experiences, which sometimes involve the radical annihilation of time altogether—as with genocides. Despite presentism, acceleration and outright annihilation, however, the contemporary era is still one of many different temporalities: the concept of heterochrony makes justice to this other experiences of time (sometimes in Western societies themselves). The chapter ends with a consideration of the ways in which archaeology can enrich the impoverished, disjointed and unjust time of supermodernity.

With time, space is the other dimension that sociologists and geographers take into account when characterising the excess of our era. In Chapter 7, I explore some of the characteristics of supermodern spatiality: in the first place, the extraordinary expansion of anthropogenic space, of which archaeology provides eloquent evidence. Paradoxically, expansion has not enriched experiences of place, but rather the opposite. Ours is a world of progressive spatial impoverishment. This happens at different levels—horizontally, vertically and temporally—and has a very physical dimension, not just psychological or social. Another aspect of supermodern spatiality that is examined is the proliferation of ephemeral space, which is associated with both dominant and counterhegemonic practices. Expansion entails the disappearance of boundaries and permanent places, but also the appearance of new, durable barriers and border zones. In fact, ours is a world of walls: some built as a protection against an outside perceived as dangerous, some to keep those described as dangerous confined. Spatial excess can be understood as the production of too much space too fast, but it can also refer to an excess of space that has to be discarded: spatial waste. Under this category, I include marginal, leftover and empty places. The chapter ends on a positive note with an exploration of ways in which archaeology, like art, can counteract spatial impoverishment by re-enchanting the world and remaking place.



Chapter 8 tackles the material excess of supermodernity through some of its most characteristic phenomena: proliferation, monstrosity, new materials, waste and heterogeneous atmospheres. The proliferation of things is clearly observable in the archaeological record, but so is the impoverishment (and therefore the decrease in things) suffered by large masses of people: from traditional communities losing their know-how to the urban poor. The proliferation of things goes hand-in-hand with the increase in monstrous objects. These I conceptualise as excessive things whose monstrosity can be defined in physical, ontological and moral terms. Waste is the consequence of material proliferation and is the most eloquent materialisation of supermodern excess in general. The chapter ends with a note on atmospheres. This is a call of attention to the rich material diversity that can be still found in our world and that is not reducible to styles or typologies.

The concluding chapter summarises some of the main points of the text and proposes a contemporary archaeology that contributes to defining our era without being constrained by the conceptual framework of the Anthropocene.

# 1

## An archaeology of the contemporary era

**T**HIS BOOKS STARTS from the idea that we are living in a unique era and that this era can be defined in archaeological terms. Even more, it argues that it is archaeology that can better define our age, because ours is, first and foremost, a time of material excess. The current popularity of neomaterialist and similar approaches in the social sciences and the humanities would probably never have happened without the feeling of global crisis provoked by such material excess. The situation should then be favourable for an archaeology that addresses this exceptional saturation of things and its manifold effects. Such should be, in my opinion, one of the main tasks of an archaeology of the contemporary world. This, however, is not necessarily the case in this very heterogeneous and fast-growing field. The aim of this chapter, then, is to offer a reflection on the nature of the specific contemporary archaeology that is espoused here. I will thus start by exploring the diversity of the field and its regional traditions, so as to locate my own research, and then will defend the usefulness of archaeology to characterise the era in which we live. This, of course, begs a series of questions: How can we define the present age archaeologically? What kind of knowledge is obtained by applying the archaeological gaze to the present? In which way is this knowledge different to that produced by other disciplines?

### Archaeologies of the contemporary past

This book is an archaeological examination of the recent past and the present—an archaeology of the contemporary era. What is contemporary archaeology, however, and even “contemporary”, is far from obvious. It is not my intention to provide here a detailed overview of the archaeology of the contemporary past and its genealogy as this has been done elsewhere (Buchli and Lucas 2001a; Harrison and Schofield 2010; Harrison 2011, 2016; Graves-Brown et al. 2013; Harrison and Breithoff 2017), but some clarifications are needed to contextualise the present work within the extant traditions. Despite its youth, the archaeology of the contemporary past has a convoluted history, since it was invented several times in different places. As we know it today, we can trace its birth to the publication of *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past* (2001a), an edited volume by Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas that set the theoretical agenda for the following years. However, there had been a previous attempt two decades before at investigating the present from an archaeological point of view. The “archaeology of us”, as it was called (Gould and Schiffer 1981), emerged in the intellectual environment of the New Archaeology of the 1960s and 1970s with its quest for cultural laws. The archaeology of us had a clear debt with ethnoarchaeology, but moved away from it in two important ways: as its name implied, it focused on modern industrial societies, instead of traditional ones, and it did so without the analogical imperative that was the rationale

for ethnoarchaeological work. The idea was to study “our” society (that is, contemporary Western society) as a goal in itself and not just to test, refine and expand archaeological interpretations, as was the aim of ethnoarchaeology.

Despite its relevance in shaping a new theoretical paradigm—behavioural archaeology (LaMotta and Schiffer 2001)—and the success of one of the main initiatives associated to the field—the Garbage Project (Rathje and Murphy 1992; Rathje 2001), this kind of contemporary archaeology remained marginal in the discipline as a whole, perhaps too much associated with its founding fathers (Gould 2007: 16). It is thus not possible to trace a direct ancestral link between the archaeology of us and the one proposed by Buchli and Lucas, although the work of Schiffer and Rathje was definitely in their minds (Buchli and Lucas 2001a: 4–6; Rathje 2001). *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past* was mainly influenced by post-structuralism, modern material culture studies and British post-processual archaeology, which had been investigating Western materiality since the 1980s (Shanks and Tilley 1987: 172–239; Buchli 1999; Buchli and Lucas 2001a: 7). Other sources of inspiration can be found—such as industrial archaeology (Orange 2008; Belford 2014; Palmer and Orange 2016) and heritage studies and management, particularly the work of English Heritage (Bradley et al. 2004)—but the relevance of Schiffer, Gould and Rathje in opening the present to archaeological scrutiny should not be underestimated.

This genealogy forgets at least two important developments, one theoretical, the other practical. Regarding the theoretical, it is important to mention the pioneering work of French archaeologists Philippe Bruneau and Pierre-Yves Balut (1982).<sup>1</sup> More than three decades ago, they proposed some ideas that are becoming common currency today. They defended that archaeology should study recent periods that had been neglected hitherto, such as the nineteenth century (this was quite revolutionary in continental European archaeology), but also the present itself. However, the proposal is more radical than a mere archaeology of the contemporary. Bruneau and Balut suggested that when the time limit of archaeology is shattered, at least three things happen: first, archaeology is forced to look for something else than the age criterion to define itself; they argue, following a very French tradition initiated by Leroi-Gourhan (1945) in the wake of Marcel Mauss, that this something has to be “all the creations of human labour” (Bruneau and Balut 1982: 9) or, to put it in a more anthropological way, technical systems (Lemonnier 1992, 2012). Technical systems cover all materiality, including the most humble and banal things, and from this point of view, archaeology is situated in a better position than art history, which also deals with contemporary material culture but of a very specific kind. Furthermore, technical systems are considered to have their own agency: “they do not ‘reflect’ ideas, institutions, etc of society . . . they are also motors that modify them and contribute to their explanation” (Bruneau and Balut 1982: 10).

Another important consequence that Bruneau and Balut saw in contemporary archaeology is that, by looking at the present, the discipline necessarily moves beyond excavation, which can no longer define a field that is forced to look at the surface (Bruneau and Balut 1982: 6–8). Bruneau (1986) himself studied the archaeology of French Catholicism (from plaster statues to reproductions of the cave of Lourdes). This turn to the surface has been retaken recently by different archaeologists (Harrison 2011; Kobialka 2013). Last but not least, an archaeology of the modern and contemporary, Bruneau and Balut argue, implies the *dépériodisation* of the discipline. When archaeology is concerned with all eras, it is no longer associated with any: “Modern and contemporary archaeology gives rise necessarily to a ‘general archaeology’” (Bruneau and Balut 1982: 5). This is also in line with current perspectives (Harrison 2011), although the French archaeologists insist that a general

archaeology is “deperiodised” but not “dehistoricised” (Bruneau and Balut 1982: 18). A concern with the historical is a continental European tradition that is perhaps less present in the British tradition (cf. Harrison and Schofield 2010). As it happened with American contemporary archaeology, however, the French version remained self-contained and had little if any impact outside the country.

Another development that is rarely considered comes from what is variously described as rescue, preventive, commercial, or contract archaeology in Europe and Cultural Resource Management (CRM) in the United States. Whereas the role of heritage management in the development of contemporary archaeology has been widely recognised in the United Kingdom, it is not so much the case in continental Europe (but see Hurard et al. 2014). This is because archaeologists working in the heritage sector in Spain, France, or Germany have seldom theorised about their own practice—or at least have left little written proof of such theorisation. Nevertheless, preventive archaeology, as it is usually known in France (where this kind of archaeology is largely conducted by a State agency, INRAP, and not just by private contractors), has been forced to deal with the archaeological record of the most recent past on a daily basis. This is true also in the British case, but here archaeologists from the heritage sector have published more about landscapes and the built environment than about excavations (Cocroft and Thomas 2003; Buchli et al. 2004; Penrose 2007; Schofield and Cocroft 2009). In continental Europe, instead, it has been mostly the past encountered through digging, in the context of urban interventions or in assessing the impact of large infrastructures in the countryside, that has elicited more reflection.

Thus, modern conflict archaeology owes an outstanding debt to preventive archaeology throughout the continent: First World War and Second World War battlefields, Spanish Civil War trenches and Nazi *Lager*n were first surveyed and excavated as part of archaeological impact assessment and mitigation projects during the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Kerndl 1992; Desfossés 1997; Ibel 2002; Pérez-Juez et al. 2002; Van Hollebeeke et al. 2014). Unfortunately, most of these works have remained unpublished or were only disseminated in obscure local journals (Van Hollebeeke et al. 2014). They have been incorporated into larger syntheses only recently (Saunders 2007; Desfossés et al. 2008; Theune 2010, 2016; Carpentier and Marcigny 2014; González-Ruibal 2016a). Preventive archaeology has not been restricted to conflict, though: it has also been actively involved in investigating urban and rural history (Bellan and Journout 2011). The excavations in modern metropolises like Paris, Marseilles, or Lyon have enabled a deeper understanding of the massive changes occurring in these cities in recent times and have situated urban transformation in its long-term context (Hurard et al. 2014). From this point of view, preventive archaeology is particularly helpful for thinking the contemporary in relation to other times, thus avoiding the danger of presentism. Preventive archaeology has also brought to light the most traumatic side of Europe’s recent urban history: bombed-out buildings, air raid shelters, forced labour camps (Moshenska 2009a; Miró and Ramos 2011; Pollock and Bernbeck 2015). Slum clearance, ghettoisation, impoverishment, racial segregation and other negative urban phenomena characteristic of modernity have been documented as well, through preventive or contract archaeology in Europe, Australia and North America. Although the focus has been (and still is) predominantly on the nineteenth century, there are a number of projects that have shown concern with the most recent urban past, particularly in the United States, although this have been sometimes carried out in the context of academic research (Mullins 2006; Praetzellis 2007; Mullins and Jones 2011; McAtackney and Ryzewski 2017). Other notable urban projects have been carried out in Europe, South Africa and South America (Hall 2006; Souza 2014;

McAtackney and Ryzewski 2017). Recent reviews of the archaeology of modern cities by British archaeologists, despite noting the relevance of the contemporary past, mention very few examples of research that actually takes it into account (Symonds 2004; Davies and Parker 2016). Contemporary archaeology has often focused on creative or experimental interventions in the present or the very recent past, disregarding serious chronotypological studies of the kind that have been conducted in historical archaeology. While maybe not as exciting as other kind of studies (and definitely less profitable in academic terms), they are essential for a proper understanding of the materiality of the contemporary era. It can be expected that people with experience in rescue archaeology in urban and other contexts will be the ones with more to offer (e.g. Souza 2013a, 2013b; Belford 2014; Fraga 2017), although some analyses of twentieth-century materials can also be found in historical archaeology research projects (Casella and Croucher 2010). So far, it is perhaps in conflict archaeology where detailed empirical analyses of twentieth-century material culture can be more commonly found—and not restricted to military objects (e.g. Osgood and Brown 2009; Schnitzler et al. 2013).

There is a third development that should be mentioned, even if its relevance in the development of contemporary archaeology is more readily recognised: forensic archaeology (e.g. Buchli and Lucas 2001a; Doretti and Fondebrider 2001). This has been central in the emergence of contemporary archaeologies in South America and Spain (González-Ruibal 2007; Gutiérrez 2009; Funari et al. 2010; Renshaw 2011). In both Argentina and Spain, the application of archaeology to forensic contexts arose from the need to make justice, bring therapeutic closure and meet a social demand for truth and reparation (Ferrándiz 2006, 2013; Doretti and Fondebrider 2001; Bernardi and Fondebrider 2007). Archaeological goals per se were (understandably) of secondary importance: the discipline was perceived mostly as a set of techniques that enabled the careful recovery of bodies, identification of individuals and documentation of traces of violence—a situation that has been common in other contexts as well (Connor and Scott 2001). However, research into crimes against humanity using archaeological methods gradually led, in both countries, to a wider archaeological investigation of political violence in which issues other than extrajudicial killings were taken into consideration, including memory, landscape, technologies and spaces of repression, political identities, etc. (Zarankin and Niro 2006; Zarankin and Salerno 2008; Zarankin and Funari 2008; Ríos et al. 2008; Salerno et al. 2012; Etxeberria and Pla 2014; González-Ruibal 2016a, 2017).

These diverse genealogies are behind different practices and approaches within the field of contemporary archaeology. Thus, the European tradition tends to privilege excavation, documentation, objects, depth and history (Bellan and Journot 2011), whereas British and Nordic practitioners are more interested in survey, landscape, anthropology and aesthetics (Andreassen et al. 2010; Harrison and Schofield 2010; Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014a; McAtackney and Penrose 2016). The Latin paradigm, in turn, is more concerned with politics, trauma, conflict and exhumation (Zarankin and Funari 2008). Finally, contemporary archaeology in North America and Australia can be seen in many ways as an extension of historical archaeology and its agenda. Even if both subfields may seem to intersect little at times (Harrison 2016: 168–170), the divergence is definitely greater in Europe than in North America, where many contemporary archaeologists have been trained as historical archaeologists and their work cuts across both areas of expertise and chronological frameworks (e.g. Wilkie 2000; Mullins 2006, 2017; Dawdy 2010, 2016).

Historiographical traditions and national histories explain these diverse trajectories and particularly their political ramifications, which will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter 3. With its focus on dark modernities, the present work avowedly identifies itself primarily with



the European and Latin traditions. However, it aligns itself with the British and Scandinavian perspective in its concern with theory and creative experimentation and finds common ground with historical archaeology through an understanding of the contemporary as part of the wider process of modernity and capitalism (Orser 1996; Hall 2000; Leone and Knauf 2015). Cross-breeding, after all, is common in contemporary archaeology and the trends described above should in no case be taken as self-contained and isolated, nor national traditions as uniform.

## ■ What is “contemporary”?

The concept of “contemporary” has as diverse meanings as the archaeology that studies it. For many modern historians in the English-speaking world, contemporary history usually refers to the period after the Second World War. This perspective is adopted by some archaeology of the contemporary past as well: thus, the eloquent (and evocative) title of Harrison and Schofield’s book (2010) *After Modernity*, indicates that the authors are primarily concerned with the most recent past—although the book encompasses the twentieth century as a whole. Schofield (2005: 29) has argued that “contemporary past” should be restricted to the period of which we have personal experience, and “recent past” used for the time that, while being near to us, is already removed from direct experience.

In other traditions, the British concept of the contemporary is conveyed by different terms: in Spanish the words *actual* (“current”) and *presente* are used to refer to the period of which we have personal experience, a meaning covered by the term *présent* in French. The history after the Second World War is thus identified as *historia actual* or *historia del presente* in Spain and Latin America—see Soto Gamboa (2004) for an excellent review—and *histoire du temps présent* or *histoire immédiate* in France (Leduc 1999: 78–83). In Germany, the concept *Gegenwartsgeschichte* (history of the present) is used, although it is perhaps not as common as in the French-Spanish tradition. In all cases, the distinctiveness of the present as a historical period lies in its being a lived past for the historian (Soto Gamboa 2004: 106). Instead, contemporary history in continental Europe refers to the era that started with the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century. Thus, French archaeologists tend to consider the period comprised between 1789 and the present as contemporary archaeology and the period before the Revolution as modern archaeology (Bruneau and Balut 1982; Bellan and Journot 2011), a periodisation that in theory would also work for Spain. In practice, archaeologists working on the last two centuries usually label their investigations “industrial archaeology” (Cano Sanchís 2007), rather than contemporary archaeology, due to their focus on factories and related heritage. In Sweden, it has been argued that contemporary archaeology should cover the period beginning around 1850, since historical archaeologists usually stop at that time (Burstrom 2009a: 23).

These different conceptualisations are of more than terminological consequence, because what is considered contemporary or coeval colours the way in which history is perceived and experienced and societies classified and even hierarchised (see Fabian 1983). I have argued elsewhere that it is not only our personal memories that have to be taken into account to define the contemporary, but the collective memory in which we have been socialised, including experiences transmitted by parents and grandparents (González-Ruibal 2008: 248). In non-Western contexts, then, contemporary archaeology may have to widen its scope to take into account things that happened hundreds of years ago, but are perceived in many

ways as contemporary: in my research in Ethiopia (González-Ruibal 2014a), I have worked with communities for which the sixteenth century is experientially closer than the 1900s is for most of us, and therefore contemporary in many respects. But there is no need to go far: my grandmother referred tales of the Napoleonic invasion of her village as if it had occurred in her lifetime. Note that I do not mean that all remembered past should be understood as contemporary: only the one that is considered as actual part of the present. Contemporaneity can also be purposefully created through rituals, performances and seasonal celebrations (Zerubavel 2003: 47). Societies that have experienced traumatic events (such as genocide, total war, or civil conflict) may also have an extended or transgenerational notion of contemporaneity (Hirsch 2008; Faúndez and Cornejo 2010). Contemporary time, then, cannot be immediately equated with the time of direct, personal experience. It is a culture-specific category that requires flexibility on the part of the archaeologist.

The concept of the contemporary has to be problematised further to overcome the historicist assumptions that still orient much of the debate. Lucas (2015: 3) warns against reducing contemporaneity to an issue of synchronicity. In the case of the archaeology of the recent past, it is specific of the subfield that synchronicity is understood as something that involves the researcher and not only the features and objects that she studies; this is what is behind the idea of contemporary archaeology as that of the period of which we have personal experience (i.e. a period with which we are synchronous) or as the archaeology of us (of our time). By privileging this perspective, there is the risk of limiting the potential of the field. For that reason, many seem to agree that the archaeology of the contemporary past cannot be restricted by notions of synchronicity, either personal or historical, and instead it has to be accepted that “There is no archaeology of the twenty-first century but only an archaeology of the twenty-first and all its pasts, mixed and entangled” (González-Ruibal 2008: 262). While this is often defended (Olivier 2008; Harrison 2011: 154), in practice few archaeologists working on the contemporary era follow the path of its multiple times. A way forward is offered by Gavin Lucas (2015: 6), who suggests that we replace our notions of contemporaneity as synchronicity—a relation to a unit of time (e.g. the Iron Age)—by one that is defined by temporal relations between things (Lucas 2015: 9–10) and “dispenses with any notion of succession altogether”. The key concept for this new conceptualisation is “persistence”: it is the persistence of things that connects different times. (see also Witmore 2006; Olivier 2008). I find these ideas inspiring and they inform much of the present work, in which contemporaneity is not so much defined in culture-historical terms as by relations between artefacts that coexist in the present.

At the same time, however, I am not interested in doing without conventional periodisation, which I do not find incompatible with percolating time (Witmore 2006) or multiple temporalities (Olivier 2008). People have always lived in specific ages—that is, periods of time dominated by certain features that can be defined in historical, sociological, or archaeological terms, depending on which elements we emphasise to construct our narrative. The problem is not that we acknowledge the existence of such ages, but how we imagine them: as open, heterogeneous and subjected to multiple, often contradictory temporalities, in which a variety of pasts and potential futures coalesce; or in a historicist way, as homogeneous, self-contained slices of time, part of a unilineal sequence. Thus, my avowed aim is to define an archaeological era, but I do not want to do it in historicist terms: I believe that we all live in the same age at the moment (for the first time in history), but at the same time—as I have pointed out—there are many experiences of contemporaneity, not all of which are synchronous with the era. Thus, a group of isolated hunter-gatherers in the Amazon forest lives in the global era in that

their existence is mediated by political and economic forces beyond their control, including the Brazilian government, oil companies and the United Nations. Yet they inhabit simultaneously their own temporality, which is radically different from capitalist Western time. In the following two sections I will discuss which denomination is most appropriate for our age and how this can be characterised from an archaeological point of view.

## ■ Supermodernity, postmodernity, the Anthropocene

If anything, we suffer from an overabundance of terms to define our era. Some of them are very common, other less so. They have been proposed mostly by sociologists and social theorists, but natural scientists have recently joined the game as well. In this section, instead of examining each and every term used to describe the present era (high modernity, late modernity, postmodernity, supermodernity, etc.), I will discuss the concept that I find more useful from an archaeological point of view and then examine other labels comparatively. The concept to which I refer is supermodernity (Augé 2002 [1992]; González-Ruibal 2008). The choice might seem odd, given that it is the least used term among those most widely employed to describe our times. A quick search in Google Scholar indicates that the conceptual hierarchy by number of citations should be the following: postmodernity (107,000 citations), late capitalism (58,500), late modernity (50,100), the Anthropocene (36,200), high modernity (6,570), supermodernity (5,710). Why supermodernity then?

Supermodernity, or hypermodernity (*surmodernité*), is a term coined by French anthropologist Marc Augé (2002 [1992]). Put it simply, supermodernity is modernity gone excessive—and awry (González-Ruibal 2008: 262). According to Augé, this excess has three modes of manifestation: spatial, temporal and subjective—to which I would add material. I find supermodernity useful as a concept because, unlike postmodernity, it accepts that modernity has not been overcome, but rather acquired gigantic, even threatening proportions. It is also more accurate than late modernity, which is perhaps the most common term among sociologists (e.g. Giddens 1991), insofar as it does not presuppose a chronology for the modern period. We do not know how much modernity is going to last: what we experience as late might well just be the middle or even the beginning of a process that we cannot yet appraise in its entirety. The same can be said of late capitalism. I feel more sympathy for “high modernity” and “high modernism”, although they are usually applied to an ideology and its materialisation rather than to a particular era (e.g. Scott 1998: 4–5). In this book, I will use those terms in this ideological sense.

All these concepts are equally problematic from the point of view of their chronological definition. Postmodernity, late modernity, late capitalism and even supermodernity refer to the period after 1945. The origins of postmodernity are usually set even later, in the late 1950s or early 1960s (Jameson 1991), although Lyotard (1984) sees the postmodern cultural regime as emerging in the nineteenth century—incidentally, the century that Rancière (2013) considers the cradle of *modern* culture. The phenomena that are taken into consideration (cultural production, political economy, ideology, social mores) have a temporality that might be consistent with a short chronology, but this does not mean that such temporality can be extended to all other phenomena. Reality is not perfectly synchronised. Archaeology and geology do identify some anthropogenic materials from 1945 onwards that are either new or appear in enormously higher amounts since then, including aluminium, plastic, concrete and black carbon (Waters et al. 2016), some of which can be clearly identified in archaeological

stratigraphies (Zalasiewicz et al. 2016). This goes hand-in-hand with large-scale modification of sedimentary processes, changes in the geochemical signatures of sediments and ice and other biotic, isotopic and climatic transformations. The problem is that cultural critics, historians and even geologists have been too specific when defining the point of departure of our present era (1784, 1945, or the 1970s). Natural scientists, for instance, in their search for the “golden spike” do not hesitate at suggesting exact dates for the beginning of the Anthropocene—1945–1964 for Waters et al. (2016).

Archaeology sees things in the longer duration. Archaeological phases, periods, or ages are rarely so clear-cut and the contemporary age should be no exception. Thus, some phenomena that are evidence of a new assemblage in the archaeological record clearly pre-date the generalisation of new anthropogenic materials: mass graves, dismembered bodies and unexploded ordnance are archaeological signatures of the present age that proliferate before 1945. I have suggested elsewhere to use the horizon of destruction of 1914–1918 as a chronological marker (González-Ruibal 2008), but such exactitude might be misleading as well. On the one hand, the origins of supermodernity have to be sought in material, technological and other developments taking place decades earlier. As Harman (2016) reminds us, the birth of an object is always prior to its effects. Thus, the transformations that are evident in archaeological and geological deposits after 1945 are the effects of an assemblage/object that developed earlier. In fact, for some students of the Anthropocene, the origin of the era would be Watt’s design of the steam machine in 1784 (Crutzen 2006), but this chronology is inadequate in archaeological terms. It might make sense in geological terms, but not in historical or archaeological ones—among other things because global warming, radiogenic signatures and even postmodern architecture might be global, but the disappearance of peasant societies, which is of greater archaeological relevance, has a heterogeneous temporal rhythm and cannot be bracketed between two specific dates.

The concept of the Anthropocene is of obvious importance for contemporary archaeology, because the current era does not only involve large spatial, temporal and subjective transformations, but also ecological changes on a planetary scale—some of them irreversible—made possible by the accumulated impact of new technologies, new forms of intervention in the environment and the employment of new sources of energy (Crutzen 2002, 2006; Steffen et al. 2007; Waters et al. 2016). The concept of the Anthropocene has made its way into archaeology (Solli 2011; Edgeworth 2014a, 2014b; Lane 2015; Braje 2015), although it is even more contentious than postmodernity or late modernity. For some, the notion is too anthropocentric and they would prefer to replace it by the Carbocene (LeCain 2015), the Ecozoic (Crist 2016), or the Cthulucene (Haraway 2015). Although I agree that archaeology has much to contribute to the Anthropocene debate, not in the least to its chronology (Edgeworth 2014a, 2014b; Graves-Brown 2014; Waters et al. 2016; Zalasiewicz et al. 2016), I feel uncomfortable with the concept and related labels for similar reasons. First, I am not interested in defining a geological era (or a cultural era, a social era, etc.), but an archaeological one. For this reason, I would prefer to avoid using a geological concept, even if the geological age happens to coincide largely with the archaeological. Still, as archaeologists, we do not conflate the Palaeolithic and the Pleistocene, even if they occur almost simultaneously (ca. 2.5 million to 11,000 years ago). We keep both terms, because they refer to different (if intertwined) phenomena.

Second, and most importantly, the Anthropocene misleadingly puts a universal *anthropos* at the heart of the era (Moore 2016). To displace the *anthropos* in posthumanist fashion (Braidotti 2013; Morton 2013), as in the terms Ecozoic or Cthulucene, is unsatisfactory: they are more a utopian aspiration at a non-anthropocentric world in which humans and

non-humans reorganise their lives in a more symmetrical way, than a realistic description of the present and foreseeable future. The current geological era has been largely shaped by Man. And I am using the word consciously: it has been the Man of humanism—white, Western, male (Braidotti 2013)—that has created the ecological conditions of our troubled age. It is not spiders or protozoa that are responsible for climate change. It is not Fulbe women or Aché hunter-gatherers either. The concept of the Anthropocene conflates Man and human. It makes all humanity guilty of something for which many are not—if anything, they are victims. The origin of the Anthropocene has very specific cultural, political, economic and geographic reasons and it is for this reason that some would prefer the concept Capitalocene (Moore 2016). I feel much more sympathy for this term, but I still find it inadequate, because although capitalism is by far the politico-economic regime that has done more by far to give birth to the Anthropocene, it has not been the only agent. During the brief socialist interlude (1917–1991), the Second World engaged in material practices, developed relations with nature and unleashed destruction in a scale that is scarcely distinguishable from capitalism (Feshbach and Friendly 1993). The Aral Sea, for instance, lost 90 per cent of its surface due to Soviet irrigation projects. The pollution generated by the factories of socialist countries and the infrastructures that transformed the face of the planet, such as the White Sea–Baltic Canal constructed during Stalin’s time, demonstrate that capitalism is not the only ideology promoting planet-wide material transformations. Indeed, Marx was a great admirer of capitalism: he was not against technological progress *per se* or its capability to transform the world (Berman 1983), but against the social inequalities underscoring capitalist development.

I would add a third reason for my rejection of the Anthropocene as the focus of contemporary archaeology: it puts all emphasis on relations between humans and non-humans (and between non-humans). This runs the risk of downplaying (conflictual and asymmetrical) relations between humans. These relations are structured by class, race, sex and gender. Our era cannot be defined solely from the angle of the Anthropocene—at least not from an archaeological point of view: total war, dictatorship, genocide, coloniality, gender violence, religious fundamentalism, or nationalism are important forces that define the contemporary world materially and that cannot be reduced to pure geological issues. In fact, using concepts from the natural sciences runs the risk of naturalising inequalities and the work of neoliberalism and concealing the real “assimilation of the natural *by* the social” (Crist 2016: 28; Hornborg 2017).

## ■ Reasserting the modern divide

What is behind both capitalism and real socialism is modernity. The concept of supermodernity, therefore, has the analytic advantage of allowing a consideration of both capitalist and communist regimes under the same mantle. At the same time, it situates the current era in its long-term historical context: the history of modernity that can be traced back to the fifteenth century. There is also an academic advantage in this for archaeology, as it blurs the artificial divide between historical and contemporary archaeology. The concept of modernity, however, does not enjoy a great reputation in archaeology and anthropology. This is understandable, as the modern divide has often been used to detach indigenous societies from their pasts and to neutralise their legitimate claims. It also has hampered the study of long-term processes that cut across the modern-premodern or prehistoric-historical divides (Carballo and Fortenberry 2015). Calls to blurring dualisms are frequent. Thus, Carballo and Fortenberry (2015: 9) bemoan the “artificial boundaries that disrupt dialogues among disciplines”,



such as that of the “ancient/modern divide” (see also Schmidt 2006). In a similar vein, Dan Hicks (2010: 85) argues that “Any model of radical difference between the premodern and the modern . . . is thus unhelpful” (also Hicks and Beaudry 2006: 4). Dawdy (2010: 763), in turn, considers that the modern period has been arbitrarily defined and its purported beginning is but a “mythic rupture”. The modern era, in the opinion of Dawdy (2005: 160), is a “monumental contingency” whose overdramatisation impedes us from seeing historical connections and continuities. I totally agree with these authors in that we have to overcome the divide between historical and prehistoric archaeology from an academic point of view and that the difference between prehistoric and historic is often blurry and even tinged with colonial undertones (Schmidt and Mrozowski 2013). Definitely, more research across the divide is necessary, as is collaboration between practitioners working on both sides. But I cannot endorse the idea that the divide between modern and non-modern societies is arbitrary or necessarily unhelpful (see also Orser 2012).

I see some problems in the denial of the modern divide. First, that there is no obvious, catastrophic rupture that can be easily pinpointed in the archaeological record or elsewhere is not evidence against the existence of modernity. As I have argued, we archaeologists do not often use (and should not use) the deceptively precise chronological frameworks of traditional historiography or other disciplines. From an archaeological point of view, there is of course no 1453 or 1492 with which to start modernity—but few historians today would be so specific anyway. The same can be said for any other period. Yet the absence of a precise beginning cannot be used as an argument to deny the existence of different periods, times, or assemblages.

Second, the idea that there is no radical rupture may be true in some contexts, such as urban contexts in North America or northern Europe, but in many other places in the world, the arrival of modernity has been catastrophic; its irruption can be actually identified in the archaeological record (if we do not expect to date it within the year or the decade, of course). As somebody who has witnessed the world of the *Ancien Regime* crumbling before his eyes, I cannot but disagree with the idea that the modern break is a chimera. The idea of interruption is one of the basic tenets of this book, to which I will return in the next chapter.

Thirdly, some anthropologists have been demonstrating for a while that there exist radical differences between modern and non-modern societies (Viveiros de Castro 1992; Bird-David 1999; Descola 2005). The differences between an Araweté of the Amazonian forest and a Western archaeologist are not merely cultural, they are ontological: in many ways, we live in different worlds (Alberti et al. 2011). Denying this kind of deep alterity, as Holbraad et al. (2014) criticise, can be seen as a form of domination: “a matter of holding the capacity to differ under control—to place limits upon alterity and therefore . . . upon thought also”. Less dramatically perhaps, it prevents us from understanding the peculiarity of modernity (and hypermodernity) and the nature of its evils. This denial of difference is at times supported on Bruno Latour’s idea that “we have never been modern” (Latour 1993). Yet this is a misreading of the philosopher. Of course modernity is a fiction and so is gender, race, or the individual—one of its most powerful figments (Hernando 2017). But these are fictions that have a real impact in the world, including very material effects that are everywhere to be seen and suffered (Morton 2013: 9).

Nor is the denial of modernity as rupture unique to archaeology. It has a long genealogy in the humanities: Michel Foucault, whose work is predicated on the very idea of rupture, criticised already the difficulties found by his contemporaries in accepting discontinuities: “a singular repugnance is experienced when it comes to think difference — to dissociate the reassuring form of the identical.” It is as if “we were afraid of thinking the *Other* in the time of

our own thought” (Foucault 1969: 21). The reason for denying radical otherness can be found in cultural anthropology (particularly American), where, as Dawdy (2010: 763) remarks, “language that compares the ‘West and the Rest’ in development terms that deny coevalness or depict non-Western peoples as frozen in time is no longer acceptable.” In (postcolonial) anthropology, the impact of modernity on non-Western cultures has been downplayed in different ways—for instance, by arguing that processes of hybridisation and cultural change have been around for millennia or, following a lazier academic strategy, by saying that the modern/non-modern divide is a colonial fabrication and their defendants an elitist bunch (Bessire and Bond 2014: 449–450).

I have argued elsewhere that the denial of radical alterity in which anthropology has been engaged during the last thirty years may actually be less progressive than the acceptance of the divide between modern and non-modern societies (González-Ruibal 2014a). My point is that perspectives that defend a continuum between indigenous and Western cultures often fail to grasp the radically different notions of space, time, self, nature and culture of indigenous societies.

Downplaying modernity paradoxically aligns liberal scholars with forms of reactionary argumentation that they abhor, such as the views of climate change deniers (González-Ruibal 2012: 59–60). The argument is similar. Global warming sceptics affirm that there is nothing unique in the transformation of climate during the last two hundred years, since it has always been changing. There is no rupture or dramatic divide. The same argument is forwarded by postcolonial critics to deconstruct the “trope of [the] vanishing Indian” (Wilcox 2010). Conservatives argue that there was no genocide of indigenous peoples to save the face of the colonial enterprise; postcolonial scholars argue that there was no genocide to assert the persistence of indigenous groups and to defend their battered rights. Likewise, anthropologists who celebrate consumption end up defending positions that are not different from corporations. Thus, Gregson et al. (2007) argue that the contemporary problem of waste has nothing to do with “a society ceaselessly discarding and abandoning its surplus as excess, as part of an endless desire for the new”. For them, attitudes towards things have not changed significantly in recent times. In the last instance, this condones capitalist excesses, by delinking ecological crisis, consumption and the shaping of subjectivity under capitalism.

My point is that if we are ready to accept the influence of capitalism and modernity in unnaturally changing global environmental conditions, we should be equally willing to accept that they can bring catastrophic changes to human culture—as can be seen in the loss of language diversity or the destruction of traditional landscapes. Even the relevance of capitalism to the Anthropocene is sometimes minimised. This is the case with perspectives that conflate the Holocene and the Anthropocene (Braje 2015: 378–379), as the former was the first era in which humans commenced to modify the environment (through mass extinctions, for instance). It has also been argued that for geologists living a million years hence, whether change was triggered by Neolithic tools or the steam engine will make little difference (Braje 2016: 509). This might be true for geologists, but hopefully not for historians and political scientists (if such occupations exist by then). The same long-term perspective that underestimates modernity and capitalism is found in projects on resilience and ecological adaptation that are becoming popular (e.g. Bradtmöller et al. 2017). Their goal is to examine how communities in the past (even the deep prehistoric past) have coped with climate change, drought and other natural disasters. This forgets that modern catastrophes are anything but natural and that the current situation is incomparable to prehistory, in that the current meddling of humans in ecosystems has no historical parallel.

Finally, some of the criticism to the use of the concept of modernity has to do with its being part of a grand narrative that has little time for the local. Grand narratives tend to be associated with a conservative, modernist ethos, whereas local stories are seen as emancipatory, down-to-earth and closer to the feelings and needs of social actors. The present book is avowedly and unashamedly a grand narrative, insofar as it intends to outline an archaeological framework for the contemporary era. But as Gavin Lucas (2006: 39) has noted “Historical archaeology is not just local history.” There is a danger in “shifting to another extreme—rejecting grand narratives, and conducting archaeologies that only produce highly specific, localised narratives whose broader relevance is missing”.

In sum, to retain the concept of modernity, and the modern rupture in particular, is necessary for three reasons: because it puts change into sharper relief; because it is a way of being critically aware of the responsibility of Western societies in the troubles of the present, and because it respects ontological difference. My account may look pessimistic, particularly for those who embrace vitalism, much in vogue in liberal academia today. With Gastón Gordillo (2018: 125), however, I only criticise that vitalism which is defined as “an affirmative becoming oblivious to ruptures, which is the type of vitalism celebrated by capitalist ideology”. While the modern fracture may not enjoy a good press in anthropology, it has always been the focus of some of the best sociology and philosophy. It is to the tradition of the Frankfurt School, Hanna Arendt, or Anthony Giddens, to which I relate—a tradition that has to be complemented with decolonial thinkers that have deconstructed modernity from the imperial periphery (Dussel 1993; Quijano 2000). These intellectual forebears, important as they are, are not enough for the challenge ahead: that is, to define a supermodern era from an archaeological point of view. My purpose is not to identify the material correlates of something that has already been described by social theorists (a typical, though subaltern, archaeological task). It is the reverse: I intend to examine the contemporary archaeological record to define an era. Or, as Lucas (2010: 353) posits, “rather than thinking about how objects can be interpreted in terms of the event, we ought to be thinking about how an event could be interpreted in terms of objects.” This is the goal of this book and of the next section in particular.

## ■ Defining an archaeological era

Defining archaeological ages, horizons and phases has been a primordial task of archaeology since the beginning of the discipline as a scientific field in the early nineteenth century. Today, it is sometimes seen as something sterile or at least necessary but uninteresting. Here I would like to argue that trying to define the contemporary era archaeologically might be a way of understanding it better. Characterising our times in archaeological terms means, in the first place, putting the emphasis on things, which necessarily offers an alternative view to that offered by disciplines focusing primarily on textual or oral sources. Christopher Witmore (forthcoming a), for instance, wonders how is it that there are no more practitioners trying to define a new archaeological era “beginning with the mega-monstrous things that are now pervasive”. I agree with him that this is an essential task: not just to look at the things of our age, but those that best characterise it. However, I find this insufficient. Archaeology has been described as the discipline of things *par excellence* (Olsen et al. 2012). I will not deny this, but there are other fields that can lay a claim on materiality (Miller 1987; Henare et al. 2007; Trentmann 2009)—today more than ever with the rise of neomaterialist perspectives (Witmore 2014). In this context, it has understandably been suggested to turn archaeology into pragmatology to give justice to its new role as the science of things *sensu lato*



(*ta pragmata*) (Witmore 2012). Yet if there is something that is uniquely archaeological, this is the archaeological record (Schiffer 1972; Lucas 2012; Nativ 2018). This sounds redundant but is not trivial: no other science is predicated on the idea of producing knowledge primarily through the systematic examination of the materiality of abandoned, ruined, or buried things (Shanks 1992, 2012; Olsen 2010; Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014). My quest for the inherently archaeological does not have to be seen as a desire to police disciplinary boundaries or carve out a field within the social sciences. Rather, I defend that if we want to contribute something valuable and original as archaeologists, then we have to work and think as archaeologists (González-Ruibal 2013). It is not really useful to take the robes of other disciplines: anthropologists do better anthropology and historians better history than us. I do not mean to imply either that archaeology cannot work with all sorts of materiality—buried or on the surface, abandoned or in use, dead or alive (see González-Ruibal 2006a, 2014a; Harrison 2011; Witmore 2012, 2014; Olsen et al. 2012); I will be actually mentioning many things that have not yet entered the archaeological record.

However, I still defend that the proper domain of archaeology is the archaeological (Nativ 2018), which refers to a specific mode of being of things. Not necessarily buried, as it is often imagined, but out of use. Admittedly, a strict divide between the systemic (i.e. living) context and archaeological context as defined by Michael Schiffer (1972) cannot be maintained: industrial ruins, for example, can be used by homeless people, and a junkyard can become a tourist attraction or a space for leisure (Edensor 2005; Burström 2009b; Kobińska 2014) without for that reason not being archaeological sites. Fragments from the past, including the remote past, are continuously mobilised in the present (Witmore 2014). Nevertheless, the concepts of systemic and archaeological are still productive, if we understand them as points in a continuum. Thus, I put to the residues of the contemporary era the questions raised by Schiffer (1972: 156): “Why is there an archaeological record? How does a cultural system produce archaeological remains? What kinds of inter-cultural and intra-cultural variables determine the structure (as distinct from the form and content) of the archaeological record?” After all, the formation processes that occur in our times are not inherently different to those of other periods (Schiffer 1987).

What exactly is the archaeological record has been the matter of some debate in the discipline and the concept remains polysemic. It is not my intention to enter this debate, for which I refer to Gavin Lucas’s excellent book on the topic (Lucas 2012). There is, however, a general understanding that the record involves both the residues of past assemblages and the archive produced by archaeological interventions (Lucas 2012: 258–259). I am interested here mainly in the first meaning of the term and in the idea of assemblage, because it is the destruction associated with irreversible change that contributes more to the creation of the archaeological record (Lucas 2010: 356). Looking at “changes in material organisations with high irreversibility” (such as the end of peasant societies or heavy industry in the West) inevitably prevents us from producing the kind of narratives that are characteristic of ethnography or microhistory, but it allows us to tackle those transformations that are most decisive over the long term (Lucas 2010: 356–357).

Contemporary archaeology also deals with what is in the process of being dematerialised and disassembled—things that in some cases become rematerialised and reincorporated into extant assemblages through recycling, lateral cycling, curation, collection and so forth (Schiffer 1987). The contemporary archaeological record, in fact, includes both dead and non-dead elements. I resort here to Ewa Domanska’s reading of Greimas’s semiotics, which she applies to the present/past dichotomy. In Greimas’s semiotic square, the present is

not opposed to the past, but to the non-present, whereas the opposite of the past would be the non-past. The non-absent past acquires, through the double negation, a positive meaning: a past which is somehow still present or of which we cannot rid ourselves (Domanska 2006a: 405). If we turn now to the duality systemic/archaeological, we can oppose the systemic or living context to the non-systemic or non-living. This, I would argue, is the existential mode of much of the abandoned things and places of the present. Thus, contemporary archaeologists should be ready to engage not only with the disassembled, but with the non-systemic as well: what is in the process of being disassembled or what is in ruins but used at the same time (Dawdy 2010; Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014: 8; see Chapter 6). From this point of view, the systemic and the archaeological may be contrary but not contradictory.

Looking at residues, ruins, things out of use and garbage might not seem the most promising approach to understand either the contemporary era or things. Yet Martin Heidegger already called attention to the fact that it is when things fail to work or are broken that we are closer to grasping something on the nature of Being. This does not mean that Being is revealed per se, but at least we can understand, according to Graham Harman (2002), that one of the defining features of things is their being withdrawn. The archaeological record is, according to almost any definition, what is not functioning and therefore it should be the status in which the qualities of the thing (or at least its unsurmountable obscurity) becomes more manifest.

I will, however, keep away from metaphysics. First, because, as an archaeologist and not a philosopher, I am not interested in Being, but in specific beings—more particularly those of the contemporary era. Thus, throughout this book, I will emphasise how ruined or wasted things are capable of revealing something of the nature of supermodernity that is not so readily apparent when they were properly functioning. In this line, Þóra Pétursdóttir (2018) finds in a specific form of archaeological record (drift material deposited in beaches) a revelation of the nature of the Anthropocene, which she manifests through a poetic rendering of the materiality of marine debris. Second, the revelation of the nature of things in its breaking apart or abandonment that I am interested in is multifaceted: ruined things tell us about their technology, about their physicality, but, more importantly, they tell us about the economy, society and culture that sustained their lives (Burström 2017a; DeSilvey 2017: 35).

Examining the ruins, that is, the archaeological record of the contemporary era, can also be a way of disentangling supermodern politics (Gordillo 2014; Weizman 2014) and unwrapping the words, symbols and meaning that envelop and conceal things (Olsen 2010). In that I follow, of course, Walter Benjamin, for whom the ruin, as a material allegory, was a means of “demythifying and stripping away symbolism – a means of approaching historical truth through reduction” (Stead 2003: 51). Perhaps more importantly, I take inspiration from Elias Canetti, when he writes about excrement—the most abject form of residue:

Nothing has been so much part of one as that which turns into excrement . . . The excrement . . . is loaded with our whole blood guilt. By it we know what we have murdered. It is the compressed sum of all the evidence against us.

(Canetti 1962: 210–211)

The archaeological record of supermodernity (its ruined landscapes, mass graves, extermination camps, abandoned factories) is the end of the “power-process of digestion”, which would have remained concealed from view in many cases if it were not for its faeces—ruins, rubbish, bones.

## ■ Archaeological knowledge and the contemporary past

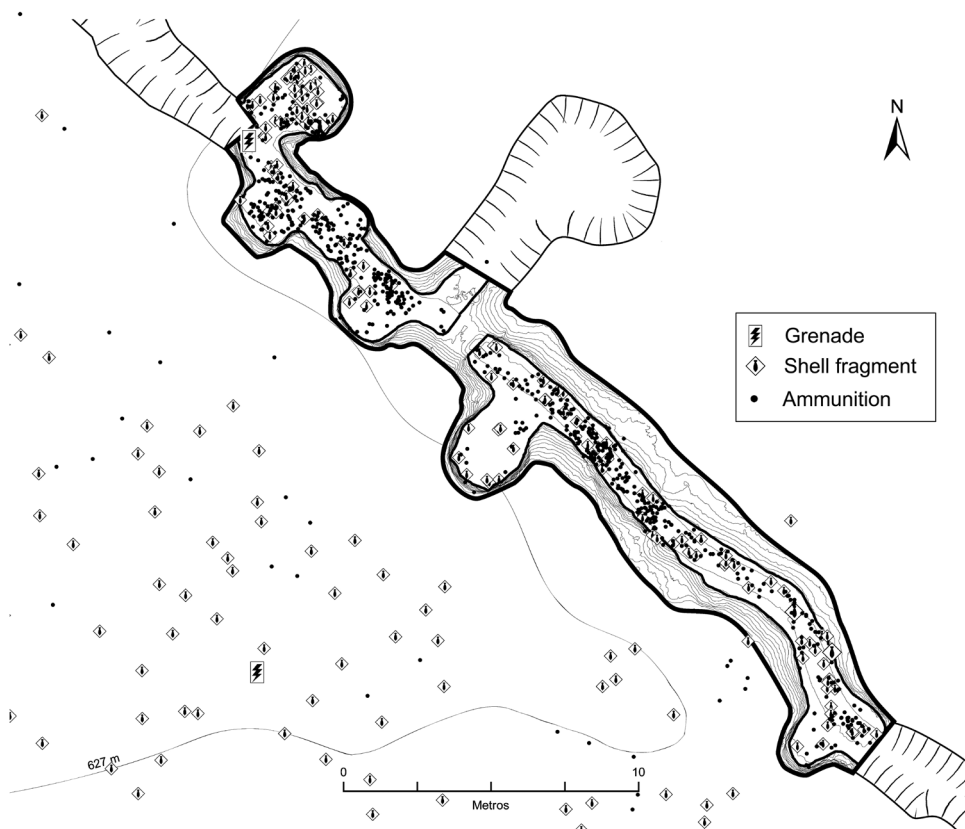
In the previous sections, I have defended the idea that the archaeology of the contemporary era is particularly powerful when it deals with the archaeological record and with the material consequences of modernity. However, the kind of knowledge produced by archaeology when it looks at the contemporary past still needs clarification, because it is not immediately obvious. What can we know from studying things or remains of things that are so recent, about which so much has been told and written, and that are, at best, an incomplete and ambiguous form of evidence? An option is to be less concerned with knowledge understood as the discovery of something in the traces of the past and more with engaging creatively with the present (Harrison 2011). The production or co-production of heritage offers another solution for contemporary archaeology that does not necessarily require generating new positive knowledge about the past, at least in conventional terms, but rather working with what there is (Harrison 2011; Holtorf and Fairclough 2013). Thus, contemporary archaeologists have produced stimulating reflections about the relationship between place, identity, pop culture, memory and heritage, for instance (see Lashua et al. 2009; Graves-Brown and Schofield 2011; Schofield and Rellensman 2015; Ryzewski 2017), that problematise and expand notions of heritage and emic valuations of places and things. Here, however, my focus will not be on heritage and creativity, but rather in the epistemological implications of intervening in the contemporary era through archaeological methods.

Contemporary archaeology can produce knowledge about phenomena that are not known or deficiently known by other methods and from other sources. But, perhaps less intuitively, it can also make us know what we already know: this is what I would call “cognition through recognition”. Regarding the revelation of the unknown, it is not difficult to find examples where archaeology can make a positive empirical contribution to our knowledge of the contemporary era. Forensic archaeology and the archaeology of dictatorships and violence offer excellent examples where the discipline can be deployed to produce knowledge about events that are at best only partially known—because of the lack of written documentation, because the written information is insufficient, or because it has been severely distorted for propaganda purposes (see Forensic Architecture 2014). Documents may not have been produced in the first place, as with extrajudicial killings (Renshaw 2011), genocides (Sturdy Colls 2015), or clandestine centres of detention (Zarankin and Salerno 2008), or they might have been destroyed purposefully or by chance, as happened with many military records of the Second World War. Post-colonial conflicts, including wars and political violence of different kinds, are also more difficult to track on paper. In other cases, the documents do exist but are unavailable to researchers for a diversity of reasons: they might still be classified, as with much Cold War material, a fact which has led John Schofield (2005: 39–40) to suggest that this period is closer to Prehistory than to History, as conventionally understood. Institutions, companies and governments might not be interested in disclosing information because it can harm their public image: although plenty of historical records exist of Lufthansa’s employment of forced labour during Nazism, the company has prevented their dissemination, thus making archaeology one of the best sources to approach living conditions in its labour camps (Pollock and Bernbeck 2016: 24–25). It is easier to block access to an archive than to an open site.

A usual criticism to contemporary archaeologists—or at least one that I have heard many times—is that even if there are no documents, there are eyewitness accounts. Yet important as they are, witness accounts are notoriously complex to work with and cannot be taken as an immediate reflection of past events. This has been abundantly demonstrated in the work on

Nazi sites of genocide conducted by Carolyn Sturdy Colls: more than twenty different plans, for instance, exist for the extermination camp of Treblinka based on different testimonies (Sturdy Colls 2015: 59). Discrepancies are in themselves interesting because they are revealing of something of the nature of violence and oppression: there is a truth in false memories (Assmann 2011: 262–265). Indeed, people that have undergone extreme experiences tend to misremember them in different ways (Southwick et al. 1997), as has been abundantly demonstrated in the case of war veterans and survivors of human rights violations. Memories are also distorted among those who committed violence, who very understandably tend to provide a benign image of themselves: this is the case with European colonisers in Africa, for instance (e.g. Taddia 2005). There are categories of events that are particular difficult to witness, because they are messy and people are in a distressed state: massacres, battles, catastrophes. Battles, in particular, are also inherently chaotic events: foot soldiers can hardly have an accurate perspective of what is happening, whereas commanders are too far removed from the frontline to make good witnesses. In contrast, archaeology can provide a clearer insight into messy episodes, often by just mapping what is left (Gould 2007: 95–96) (Figure 1.1).

**FIGURE 1.1** An archaeological gaze. Distribution map of fragments of artillery shells, ammunition and grenades documented in a Spanish Civil War trench of November 1936. Maps like this allow us to understand what was happening during the battle. The result is something that no witness could have observed. Map by Manuel Antonio Franco Fernández and Alfredo González-Ruibal.



Yet even when memories do not have to do directly with either trauma or guilt, they might be distorted through time in different ways. Veterans tend to remember specific events, including military operations and political events, with extraordinary detail, but are imprecise in many other respects—including daily life (e.g. Taddia 2005: 217). The same happens in civilian contexts. Everyday objects and actions are systematically forgotten or misrepresented, because routine and repetition seal memories by keeping them below the surface of verbal articulation (Assmann 2011: 260), as was famously found by the Garbage Project regarding consumption practices (Rathje and Murphy 1992; Rathje 2001).

The experiences of marginalised or persecuted people are not always readily available through the documentary record and although interviewing them is sometimes possible, this is not always the case, for ethical, legal, or political reasons, or simply because they are no longer around: we can work with present homeless people, but we can hardly hear the voices of those who were alive in the 1940s. Furthermore, homelessness is not an identity that produces collective memory of the kind that can be found among other subalterns and that can be retrieved from descendants. Marginalised communities have received a lot of attention in contemporary archaeology and they include ethnic minorities (Andersson 2008; Arnberg 2017); political dissidents (Papoli Yazdi et al. 2013); LGBTQ people (Dezhamkhooy and Papoli Yazdi 2013); homeless people (Zimmerman et al. 2010; Kiddey and Schofield 2011; Kiddey 2017) and non-documented immigrants (De León 2015; Hamilakis 2016). Other groups, such as many peasant and indigenous communities, are illiterate: the study of their material culture can offer a more direct approach to their experiences than the use of secondary written sources (González-Ruibal 2014a).

In sum, there is ample room for archaeology to produce knowledge about recent phenomena that remain unknown or partially known. I would argue, however, that, when doing contemporary archaeology, we should neither be obsessed with knowledge understood as knowing the unknown nor relinquish the quest for positive knowledge altogether. What we have to embrace is another kind of learning: cognition as recognition. This is, in my opinion, where an essential contribution of archaeology to the study of the contemporary era lies (González-Ruibal 2014b).

Recognition was a central element in classical theories of knowledge: through the concept of *anamnesis* in Plato and *anagnorisis* in Aristotle. Although the latter is properly translated as “recognition” and the former as “recollection”, they share important similarities, since they imply a previous knowledge of something. In the Platonic dialogue *Meno*, Socrates confronts the sophist that gives his name to the work, who suggests that knowledge is useless, since learning what is already known is absurd, as it does not produce anything new, and inquiring into the unknown is impossible, because we do not know what inquiry to make in the first place (*Meno* 80d, e). To this Socrates replies by saying that the soul is immortal and has been born many times and seen many things and therefore there is nothing that it has not learnt: it is thus logical that the soul be capable of remembering (*anamnethēnai*) what it already knew (*epistato*) (*Meno* 81d, e). “Learning and inquiry”—concludes Socrates—“are nothing but recollection (*anamnesis*).” This learning what is already known is different from what *Meno* presents as useless. There are two differences. On the one hand, to know does not imply that we really know that we know. Anamnesis—like psychoanalysis—is making unconscious knowledge come to light. On the other hand, for the sophist *Meno*, knowledge of the known suggests passivity: why care to enquire into what is already known? For Socrates, instead, it is an active task. We do want to learn, but what triggers the desire for knowledge is not discovering the unknown, but rather the opposite: remember what we already



know. Remembering, like learning, and unlike mere knowing, means action—memory work (Shanks 2007: 593). The idea of work in anamnesis is well expressed by Lyotard (2004: 108), for whom anamnesis “is a matter of working to reach the disposition one already has, of labouring to prepare oneself for the labour in process”.

The concept of *anagnorisis* was developed by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. Anagnorisis, recognition, “is the change from ignorance to knowledge” (*Poetics* 1452a). There are three interesting issues in Aristotle’s concept: first, the idea of change (*metabolē*). As in Plato’s recollection, recognition is far from passive: it implies an active transformation both in knowledge and in the knowing subject. The second element is the idea of terror: recognition causes compassion or terror, as when Oedipus recognises his mother (*Poetics* 1452b, 1454a). The third element has to do with things. Although Aristotle places most emphasis on the recognition of people, he points out that anagnorisis can happen with inanimate things (*apsicha*), as well, and he adds: “of the most trivial kind” (1452a). Besides, things as signs (*sēmeiōn*) can be crucial in unleashing the process of recognition.

Recognition can come as a shock. In the case of the archaeology of the contemporary past, it can be the shock of actuality that comes from the recognition/confirmation, with material proofs, that the past existed, that it was so and it is here (Pearson and Shanks 2001: 42); it can be the shock of unveiling a traumatic past that we knew already—as happens with the exhumation of mass graves. There is something alarming in anagnorisis, therefore, that is absent in anamnestic recollection (Assmann 2011: 94–98). In the case of the archaeology of the recent past, however, this duality is not so clear: recollection and recognition are inextricably and uncannily linked. It is important to note that one of the forms of anagnorisis pointed out by Aristotle (*Poetics*, 1455a) consists actually in recollection (*mnēmēs*). Remembering is not an easy task, as one may gather from Socrates’ straightforward demonstration of anamnesis through the resolution of a geometrical puzzle: it implies loss and addition, selection and distortion. This is not necessarily something negative. On the contrary, through anamnesis, as much as through anagnorisis, we may come to know things better. Furthermore, as the traces of violence of the twentieth century prove, anamnesis—remembering what we already know—can be as frightful and painful as any anagnorisis (Lyotard 2004: 118).

## Summary

In this chapter, I have examined different schools of contemporary archaeology to contextualise the present work. I have outlined different genealogies, some of which have been successful, some of which not. Rather than seeing the latter as dead ends, I find in them elements of inspiration that can (and should be) be resuscitated to enrich the field. I have also tried to explain the diverse traditions based on differing historical trajectories. Thus, there is a greater concern with traumatic events in the contemporary archaeology of continental Europe or Latin America, which are regions that have been marked by political violence and dictatorship throughout the twentieth century, and more interest in experimentation, landscape and daily life in the UK, which has been spared some of the horrors of supermodernity. Academic traditions are also of the greatest importance, as are understandings of what “contemporary” means. Thus, the British tradition tends to put more emphasis on the post-Second World War period, whereas in the continental European tradition “contemporary” refers to the era that started with the French Revolution.

In this chapter, I have defended the archaeology of the contemporary past as an archaeology of supermodernity. I find the notion of supermodernity or hypermodernity useful to define our age, which is characterised by an excessive and in many ways monstrous form of the modern. I have also argued that the concept is more adequate than other terms, such as postmodernity, late modernity, or the Anthropocene. The latter, in particular, I find troubling for several reasons. Among them is the word *anthropos* that universalises a problem that has been caused by a very specific part of humanity and by very specific political economies and ideologies. It is also worrying to see how the debate on the Anthropocene tends to consign to oblivion all other phenomena that are not strictly and directly related to environmental change, despite being crucial to understanding our era—genocide, class, or gender inequality. Using the concept of supermodernity inevitably means reclaiming the notion of modernity, which has been unjustly relegated in much anthropology and archaeology. I defend that modernity *does* exist and is important to understand much of what is happening in the world today—including all the forms of violence unleashed against the non-modern. How do we define the supermodern archaeologically? I suggest that the archaeological record of the contemporary era—ruins, waste, abandoned places, devastated landscapes—offers a unique perspective that archaeologists should explore to characterise our times.

The chapter concludes with a reflection on the kind of knowledge that is produced by archaeological work on the recent past. I defend that, although archaeology can contribute new knowledge about our age, we should not be too obsessed with exploring the unknown. I propose a new form of knowledge based on ideas of anagnorisis and anamnesis: cognition through recognition. An archaeology of the contemporary era, like psychoanalysis, often means to unearth what we already knew from the beginning but did not know that we knew it.

## Note

- 1 I would like to thank Kai Salas-Rossenbach for bringing my attention to the work of these authors and providing their difficult-to-find publications.

# 2

## Ruins

A LARGE PART of the archaeological record of our era is made of ruins. No other period in history has produced so many, so diverse and so fast. The real threat of civilisational collapse and ecological catastrophe have been challenging modernist optimism for several decades and explains the widespread sensibility toward ruins that can be found in films, novels, video games and a growing academic literature (Edensor 2005; Huyssen 2006; Hell and Schönle 2010; Dawdy 2010; Garrett 2013; Gordillo 2014; DeSilvey 2017). There is no need to synthesise the debate here, for which I refer to some excellent review essays (DeSilvey and Edensor 2013; Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014a). Needless to say, ruination is not the only archaeological phenomenon, but it is one of the most recognisable. In fact, the discipline has been often associated with ancient ruins both in the popular imaginary and in the work of philosophers and artists (Shanks 1992, 2012; Holtorf 2005; González-Ruibal 2013). Many of my examples in the following chapters have to do with material vestiges, traces and fragments. I understand “ruin” in an extended sense, which is well captured by the definition offered by the Oxford English Dictionary: “The physical destruction or disintegration of something or the state of disintegrating or being destroyed”. Thus, although we associate ruins with permanent buildings, ruination is an entropic process that can affect virtually everything: a hut made of perishable materials, a forest, a machine, a body (DeSilvey 2017). The dictionary definition also refers to ruin as a process. The transit between the systemic and the archaeological often lasts decades: ruination is “a fluid state of material becoming” (Edensor 2005: 16), during which places and things may exist in a crepuscular state, not yet totally forgotten or completely abandoned (Cameron 1993). In fact, as Olsen and Pétursdóttir (2014: 7) argue, it is better to understand “ruin” as a verb, rather than a noun. As I noted in the previous chapter, my particular interest in ruination stems from the possibility of producing an alternative, critical account of modernity through its remains (Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014: 8). As Andreas Huyssen (2006: 13) has remarked: “An imaginary of ruins is central for any theory of modernity that wants to be more than the triumphalism of progress and democratisation or longing for a past power of greatness.” In this chapter, I will revise five of the main processes that are behind the production of ruins in the contemporary era—systemic collapse, systemic operation, autophagy, failure and catastrophe—and I will then examine an extreme form of devastation of life and matter that is characteristic of the present: annihilation.

### ■ Systemic collapse

The production of archaeological remains always starts with a rupture that separates life and death, the used and the discarded: a stone tool breaks, a person dies, a village burns, a collective is annihilated in a genocide, a social system disintegrates and is superseded by something else.



The most important interruptions from an archaeological point of view are those that imply irreversible breaks in the life cycle of things, persons, collectives, or social systems (Lucas 2010). The development of modernity is punctuated by these kinds of interruptions, old systems that collapse under the impetus of the new regime. In fact, modernity can be characterised as much by the ruins it produces as by the new worlds that emerge from the ashes—only the ashes have received much less attention. The imposition of earlier forms of modernity between the sixteenth and the mid-nineteenth century is full of such cases: the Protestant Reformation in England (Aston 1973), the dismantling of the *Ancien Regime* in France during the Revolution (Vovelle 1988) and the attempts at imposing a modern liberal regime in nineteenth-century Spain (Tomás y Valiente 1989). The imagery of ruins was very present in the case of the French Revolution: “Over the debris of despotism / our freedom rises, / over the ruins of Jesuism / shines our society” chanted a revolutionary (Vovelle 1988: 67). Most of the ruins produced by modernity are *not* the ruins of modernity, then, but the remains of older worlds that have been superseded, disassembled and destroyed. The archaeology of the contemporary past has to take them into account, even if they seem non-contemporary or non-modern. Precisely because of that, in fact: they are the “wreckage upon wreckage” that keeps piling at the feet of the Angel of History (Benjamin 1968: 257). The angel sees the pile of debris growing sky high before him as if it were the result of one single catastrophe—and so we should see it, too.

In this section, I will explore interruptions associated with systemic collapse: a fracture that tears a world apart and leaves it in ruins. The idea of a fracture provoked by modernity has been very present in the work of philosophers and writers during the twentieth century (Blom 2015). Peter Sloterdijk (2015), for instance, continuously uses words such as “hiatus”, “rupture” and “abyss” to refer to the anti-genealogical experiment of the moderns. Although the idea of a *Zivilisationsbruch* (rupture in civilisation) became popular after the atrocities of the Second World War (Hofmann 2011), the notion can be found already in the work of several writers, intellectuals and artists of the interwar years (Blom 2015). Having lived through a world war, the beginning of a second, the collapse of an empire and the rise of totalitarianism, Stefan Zweig (2002 [1942]: 11), wrote in exile: “all the bridges have been destroyed between our Today, our Yesterday and our Day before Yesterday.”

The First World War was widely seen as the end of a world. It is thus presented by the literature of the interwar period, as in *Zeno’s Conscience* by Italo Svevo (1923), *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann (1924), or *The Radetzky March* by Joseph Roth (1932). The interruption provoked by the war had to do with more than pure violence. For Benjamin, it represented a world breaking apart:

A generation that had gone to the school in horse-drawn carriages, now stood beneath the heavens in a landscape in which nothing but the clouds had remained unchanged and in the middle, in a powerzone of destructive forces and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.

(Benjamin 2005: 731)

He describes a pre-industrial society (the horse-drawn carriage) shattered by industrialised warfare. In fact, the landscapes devastated by the Great War are not the best archaeological manifestation of the fracture to which both Svevo, Mann, or Benjamin bear witness. What the war implied through much of Europe was the beginning of the end of the remnants of the *Ancien Regime* (Mayer 1981); this is what Benjamin captures so well with the image of the horse-drawn cart and what many writers from Central Europe conveyed so powerfully. The process of fracture was by no means limited to 1914–1918. It continued until the aftermath of

the Second World War. It is during this period where we can see the best archaeological signature of the end of a system. Systemic collapse (or, rather, systemic destruction) is particularly clear in Central and Eastern Europe, where their heterogeneous, multi-ethnic, multi-religious societies were cleansed and wiped out through the collapse of empires, war, genocide, totalitarianism and the reordering of the world.

In the German cities that were transferred to Poland after the Second World War, the authorities tried to annihilate all material evidence of their previous inhabitants, erasing inscriptions and destroying monuments (Blackler 2013: 179; Kiarszys 2016). In the Czech Republic, 2.8 million ethnic Germans were expelled from Bohemia and Moravia between 1945 and 1948. Some areas had been occupied by Germans uninterruptedly since the Middle Ages and the cultural landscape had undergone relatively little change for centuries, at least little in comparison to the brutal interruption of 1945. In a few years, ethnic cleansing, Communist social engineering and late-industrial modernity rapidly changed the face of the land. This transformation differed from region to region. Northern Bohemia, for instance, has been described as “a worst-case scenario of dystopian modernity” (Glassheim 2006: 67–68), since the area was targeted for coal mining and industrialisation, which led to high pollution rates and decreasing health standards and life expectancy. In Western Bohemia, instead, large areas of the countryside were depopulated, the settlement system was dislocated, many villages were abandoned, agricultural lands decreased and forested areas increased (Bičík et al. 2001) (Figure 2.1). As it happened in other areas, German cemeteries were often (although not always) desecrated and tombs defaced (Vařeka and Vařeková 2016). On the German side, the expulsion led to a nostalgic genre manifested in photography, art and literature (Komska 2011) that emphasised ideas of collapse of civilisation and rupture.

**FIGURE 2.1** Ruins of a church in an abandoned German village in West Bohemia, Czech Republic. Author's photograph.



The most brutal interruption was, of course, caused by the genocide of the European Jews. Cities, towns and villages that had been Jewish *shtetls* since the Middle Ages were emptied of their original population, and replaced by members of the dominant society—Ukrainians or Poles (Blacker 2013: 176)—often coming from far away. These newcomers were surrounded by the material ghosts of the previous owners (houses, temples, domestic objects) (Blacker 2013: 176–177; see also Sezneva 2007: 18). They were reused whenever possible and otherwise abandoned or destroyed, which does not mean that people were unaffected by their presence (Navaro-Yasin 2009). Omer Bartov (2007), in his travels through former Galizia, offers a litany of abandoned synagogues, cemeteries and faded Yiddish inscriptions in old Jewish properties that evince the ghostly presence of the Other in the now ethnically cleansed towns of Ukraine. Photographer Jason Francisco (Francisco 2006), in turn, has been exploring the traces of vanished Jewish life in Central and Eastern Europe for years. He documents both the vestiges of life and of death—the Jewish neighbourhoods, the extermination camps, the mass graves.<sup>1</sup> His desolate photographs of ruined, decayed and empty places powerfully transmit the impression of an unbridgeable fracture—one that remains open and bleeding. This impression is further reinforced, in his most recent work, by the use of images that have their edges blurred and unfocused. Francisco opposes what he calls the “calcified” memory of the Holocaust in Western Europe with the unsettled, unsettling memories in the East (Figure 2.2). The open chasm of an ever-decaying material world, not yet curated or looked after, prevents calcification.

**FIGURE 2.2** Belz, Ukraine, 2014. At the centre of what was one of the most storied Jewish towns in Galizia. Photograph by Jason Francisco.



The interruption of Jewish life can be seen archaeologically in other ways. Excavations in concentration and extermination camps have retrieved a wealth of material related to Jewish culture in Central and Eastern Europe before the genocide. Many of the artefacts are of course indistinguishable from the mainstream material culture of the period, since many Jews were fully incorporated into the national and wider European culture of the time as well as into the world of capitalist consumption. However, there are artefacts that are specifically Jewish as well, including objects with inscribed names, religious paraphernalia, medals and ornaments (Kola 2000: 58, Fig. 101; Gilead et al. 2010: 16; Theune 2016: 63–65).

The idea of a massive interruption of ordinary life is a main element in science-fiction dystopias, whose roots can be traced back to the nineteenth century (Woodward 2002; Yablon 2009). What is invariably interrupted is modern, bourgeois urban life. It has been correctly pointed out that anxieties about massive breakdowns are a typically white, middle-class phenomenon. Thus, Gordillo (2014: 256) cogently argues that poor people are not afraid of ruins. The poor know how to cope with apocalypse, because they are more resourceful and because they have always lived in material conditions approaching what a middle-class citizen would consider catastrophic; in sci-fi films, post-apocalyptic metropolises look suspiciously like actually existing shanty towns.

This idea is largely true depending on what kind of ruins and interruptions we are thinking of. Rural communities, peasants and indigenous groups are, of course, not afraid of the collapse of Manhattan or central London, not even of the closest city near at hand. But they are afraid of other forms of collapse: those that radically interrupt their way of life. The Guarani-Kaiowá people of Brazil have one of the most staggering rates of suicide in the world (Coloma et al. 2006), which in the 1990s was 40 times the national average (Arias and Blanco 2010: 176). This coincides with a situation of social disarray, marginalisation and the dismantling of their cultural world, which has been exceedingly rapid (Coloma et al. 2006: 200). Western urbanites might imagine apocalypse as empty skyscrapers, freeways without traffic and streets without people, but for many indigenous and peasant communities all over the world apocalypse instead arrives as busy skyscrapers, freeways full of traffic and streets full of people. Apocalypse, for the Kaiowá, is the destruction of their world by ours.

Outside the West, in fact, the disassembly of the old world often donned the robes of genocide. Genocide is what wiped out the community of Aurá and Auré, two members of a Tupi-Guarani tribe whom I had the chance to meet in the dwindling forests of eastern Amazonia. They were the only survivors of their group, which had been annihilated by invaders—a silent, unknown extermination perpetrated in the 1980s. They coped with the material interruption of their world through the obsessive reproduction of a very small parcel of it: when we visited them, they had already made over sixteen hundred arrows and were still producing more (González-Ruibal et al. 2011a: 14). A similar fate was met by the Akuntsu, of whom only four are left at the time of writing, and other groups in the Amazonia and the Matto Grosso (Cowell 1974). One of the Brazilian officers in charge of contacting and protecting these isolated Indians refers to them as *restos*, “remains” or “remnants”, as if they were archaeological vestiges: “and I apologize for using this word, I don’t mean it in a pejorative, but rather in a tragic sense” (Milanez and Shepard 2016: 131). The case of Brazil and other Amazonian countries is particularly shocking because it has happened (is happening) in our lifetime: it is strictly contemporary (González-Ruibal and Hernando 2010). But it is only the last in a long series of interruptions of life and matter throughout the non-Western world that took place at the dawn of supermodernity, as if a prelude to what was to come (Lindqvist 1992): the extermination of the Yuki in California (Kroeber 2004), the



Tasmanians (Madley 2004), the Yamana and Selkn'am in the southernmost tip of South America (Bartolomé 2003) and many others of whom we do not even have their names. Forensic archaeology has sometimes provided evidence of colonial violence during the twentieth century (Smith et al. 2017; Schmidt 2017: 228–232).

Genocide did not just entail the physical extermination of people and the annihilation of their traditions; it was also the disappearance of unique material worlds (Orquera and Piana 1999). Little archaeology of these indigenous groups has been conducted, though, except among the Yamana and Selkn'am. Research in this case has been carried out mostly as ethnoarchaeology with the main objective of finding analogies to extrapolate to other hunter-gatherers (Vila et al. 2007; but see Orquera and Piana 1999). However, the excavation of their settlements, shell middens and other activity areas offers a glimpse into a form of life cut short by capitalist expansion. In fact, the amount and variety of well-preserved materials is one of the things that attracted the attention of archaeologists. As is well known, extraordinary archaeological records are often associated to a massive systemic collapse produced by a catastrophe.

Less tragic than indigenous ethnocides and genocides but with similar material results is the disappearance of peasant communities in different parts of the world. Eric Hobsbawm (1994a: 9) wrote that, from the perspective of a future historian, the world wars would seem a relatively minor event in the twentieth century. What the scholars of the future will see more clearly is the disappearance of the agrarian societies that predominated for the last eight thousand years. Archaeologists do not have to wait for the future. They can grasp the consequences in the present of this fatal interruption of societies that have previously been extremely resilient.

The case of Spain—and many other southern European countries, where premodern forms have lingered to the present—is paradigmatic. The exodus from rural areas to the cities has been recently described as the “Great Trauma” in modern Spanish history (Molino 2016; see Falquina 2011 for an archaeological perspective). The process, which developed mostly during the second half of the twentieth century, led to the abandonment of hundreds of thousands of houses in the countryside and the disappearance of ways of life, forms of socialisation, agrarian economies and material cultures that had remained little altered for centuries (González-Ruibal 2003, 2005; Falquina 2011; González Álvarez and Alonso 2014; Alonso and González Álvarez 2016). The collapse has been no less catastrophic than in the case of indigenous genocides and has left an equally indelible mark in the archaeological sequence. An entire system has crumbled in just a few decades: houses, ploughs, paths, granaries, haystacks, watermills, chapels, tanneries, fences and every other imaginable element that sustained traditional rural landscapes (Lorenzo 1982) have vanished in the blink of an eye (Figure 2.3).

The rural world is collapsing elsewhere in Europe: in Bulgaria it is expected that 70 per cent of all villages will be abandoned in less than two decades (Zidarov and Grębska-Kulow 2013: 119). In the Mediterranean, archaeologists have been documenting the collapse of peasant communities for years, usually in the guise of ethnoarchaeology. Constantinos Papadopoulos, for instance, studies in Crete the formation processes of the archaeological record in the remote and almost inaccessible village of Moussai, where the last inhabitant left in 1968 (Papadopoulos 2013). Here too, a complete material assemblage has collapsed, including agricultural terraces, fields, houses, mills, church and ponds. While Papadopoulos is interested in abandonment and post-abandonment processes, he unwittingly documents a caesura in the archaeological record of Crete, where technological changes, road

**FIGURE 2.3** A picturesque sight or dystopia? The ruins of a peasant landscape in Galicia, Spain. Author's photograph.



construction, the effects of the Second World War and the reduction of the population led to radical changes in the agropastoral economy and the collapse of rural settlements. In another Mediterranean island, Sardinia, the ruins of a landscape of pastoralism are also the ruins of a temporality: that of shepherds who have stopped being mobile (Mientjes 2008). The end of transhumance has meant the abandonment of shelters and corrals and other infrastructure and objects related to the movement of herds.

Yet the sense of the end of a world is perhaps more poignantly conveyed by ethno-archaeological work conducted in Famorca and Serra de l'Altmirant (Alacant, Spain). In this Mediterranean landscape, archaeologists documented both the archaeological remains of pastoral activities recently abandoned (Creighton and Segui 1998) and the life of a representative of the old world: Manolo, the last shepherd of the sierra (Christie et al. 2007). Manolo lives in a ghostly world, surrounded by ruins of corrals, farmhouses, pens, cisterns, shelters, enclosures and caves. His is a conscious attitude of resistance: he has refused to join other shepherds who have fled to kinder environments and easier jobs and lives in a corral, keeps an old breed of chicken that produces fewer eggs and follows the traditional flock management system, based on animals that are not stabled and are fed with natural pasture and organic waste (Christie 2007 et al.: 317–318). Manolo maintains the systemic context working—until he dies or retires.

Outside Europe, the interruption of peasant worlds is also accelerating, from China to Peru, harassed by multinational agribusinesses, urban exodus and the modernisation of the countryside. In Senegal, peasant ways of life have been affected by the introduction of cash crops and roads. Colonial and postcolonial modernity has fractured a landscape where

settlement patterns had remained little changed for over three centuries (Richard 2015a, 2015b). François Richard writes about the “dislocated histories” of internal migrants produced by the development of the peanut economy which left a landscape of “barren expanses . . . old homes, abandoned settlements, and marginal soils”. These ruins speak of deep imperial traumas lingering into the present (Richard 2015a: 446–447). The reorganisation and fragmentation of the cultural landscape enforced by the colony during the first half of the twentieth century caused a rift that separated people from their matrilineal kin, soil, place and ancestral spirits. Its effects can still be seen today (Richard 2015a: 460–462). I have said that the end of the peasantry is not as tragic as the genocides suffered by the Jews or indigenous communities. However, this does not mean that collapse in this case is bloodless or painless. As with indigenous peoples, suicide among rural populations is higher than the national average in many countries all over the world, from India to Denmark (Arias and Blanco 2010: 177). The fracture of a world has its correlate in a subjective fracture with which many cannot cope.

Excessive modernity cleanses the world of cultural heterogeneity, alternative ontologies, multiple temporalities. The result is a homogeneous space-time in which only ruins, traces, *restos* of old worlds remain.

## ■ Systemic operation

The ordinary operation of any society generates material, social, and biological waste. We can compare this to a technological process: any *chaîne opératoire* at work produces a certain amount of debris in the making of an artefact (Lemonnier 1992). Slags and defective pots are inherent to metallurgy and pottery making, not an unexpected anomaly. The same happens with society as a whole. Some things are discarded, broken, or ruined during the normal working of the system. There is a temporality to the production of ruins of operation. In the case of capitalism, boom and bust cycles can be considered part of its normal temporality, rather than anomalies or failures (see Chapter 6). There is a rhythm to them and they are inherent to the system (Leduc 1999: 54–55). The modern ruins of northern Chile offer an excellent example of the debris produced by the normal operations of capitalism, fuelled by notions of “cheap nature” (Moore 2016). Capitalist cycles have produced there layer upon layer of abandonment and ruination between the late nineteenth century and the present, as the exploitation of saltpetre, sulphur, nitrate and copper rises and collapses (Vilches et al. 2008; Vilches and Morales 2016; Rodríguez-Torrent and Medina Hernández 2011; Rodríguez Torrent et al. 2012). Destroyed environments more generally—including ecocides—can be considered ruins of operation (Tsing 2015), which are not limited to the industrial buildings and extractive machinery employed in destructive process: deforested landscapes, dried lakes and rivers, abandoned open-pit mines and quarries—see Riede et al. (2016) for an archaeological example. These ruins are all the result of what LeCain (2009) has aptly called “technologies of mass destruction” put at the service of the appropriation of nature. In this same group, we could consider lands flooded by reservoirs, which often submerge entire villages and landscapes (Beisaw 2016). These are unique cases of invisible ruins of modernity, invisible but not necessarily forgotten, as they still have agency and can be politically mobilised (Jing 1999; Rao 2013).

Even the ruins of the most serious global crises of capitalism (Pálsson 2012; Kitchin et al. 2014; Edensor 2016: 355–357) can be understood as the effect of business as usual and not as failures, given their patterned recurrence. A singularity of supermodern ruins



of operation is how frequently these affect incomplete constructions. Although ruined unfinished buildings do exist in different periods and regions, they are relatively rare. In the contemporary era, they have become extremely abundant and speak of the economic logic of fast capitalism, the technical means that allows for the production and destruction of space at a large scale and the temporality of supermodernity more generally (see Chapter 6). Thus, Ulfstjerne (2016) argues that unfinished real estate projects in China, where buildings have not yet been finished and are already ruins, cannot be categorised as failures, because they produce profit in ways other than expected—as part of an “economy of appearances”. Unfinished ruins also play an important political-economic role in Sicily (Arboleda 2016, 2017), where hundreds of construction projects since the post-war period never reached completion (Figure 2.4). Most of the buildings are public works—dams, roads, hospitals—originally planned to bring progress to Sicily, one of the poorest regions of Italy. In other cases, they are witness to the lofty ambitions of local authorities—a monumental polo field fits into this category. When a failure recurs for seventy years, it can no longer be considered a failure, or the situation that led to it a crisis. In fact, it can be argued that incomplete developments in Sicily are part of the local political economy, in which having the buildings finished and in use is not as important as making them (they provide jobs for the unemployed, large amounts of money to constructors, and bribes and votes to local politicians). The monumentality and ubiquity of these ruins have drawn the attention of an art collective, Alterazione Video, which has set out to transform—half seriously, half mockingly—the derelict works into a form of heritage. They see them as representative of an alternative architectural style, which they call *Incompiuto Siciliano*, “Sicilian Unfinished” (Arboleda 2016, 2017). By naming the ruins a style in canonical art-historical fashion, they are implicitly criticising the projects not as failures but as part of a system that works—in a way. A final

**FIGURE 2.4** Ruins of operation: athletics stadium and polo field in Giarre, Sicily, whose construction was interrupted in 1985. Photograph by Pablo Arboleda.



example comes from Equatorial Guinea. Here, the oil boom has enabled the construction of what have been called “white elephants”, large construction projects that combine grandiosity and impracticality. Many of the supermodern buildings remain abandoned, unused, or under-utilised after construction, but this does not mean that they do not fulfil a political function—a performative one, in this case, since they have to show Equatorial Guinea’s full membership in the global club defined by skyscrapers and superhighways (Appel 2012). The empty buildings are also sites to which the government can gesture to show where the petroleum money has gone. As Appel (2012: 456) concludes, “once constructed, the work they do is to be seen.” It does not matter if the site is an airport without airplanes (González-Ruibal 2016b), or a skyscraper without running water or electricity.

Rapid urban ruination more generally belongs to the work of supermodernity. Xuefei Ren (2014) argues that the production of (ephemeral) ruins by real estate speculation in Shanghai is not irrelevant but actually part of the urban political economy and governance of the country. Destruction and ruination are more than an economy of appearances here. The displacement of residents by massive demolition (over one million people in the last three decades) creates a demand for housing in the suburbs that boosts construction, whereas the hollowed-out space in the inner city is up for grabs by investors. Urban destruction and construction is related to one of modernity’s contradictions: “all forms lose value over time (if all is going well, progress means modernity’s own projects are being constantly eclipsed by the next new)” (Dawdy 2010: 771). Although similar processes have existed before, “radicalised obsolescence” (Brito-Henriques 2017) is quite exclusive of the contemporary era. The ruination produced by radical obsolescence may last very briefly, even days: what it takes to evacuate a building and demolish it to replace it with another one. But this is not always the case. Many supermodern cities have partially ruined areas, which have been traditionally associated to the historic centre (Vergara 1999). This trend might be in reverse, though, due to gentrification processes. Residential ruination in Lisbon, Portugal, for example, is moving towards the periphery (Brito-Henriques 2017: 16–17). This is associated with the building boom of the 1960s onwards, which was characterised by fast and cheap construction. The situation is not dissimilar in other metropolises: in Madrid, decay now affects peripheral low-class neighbourhoods built during the 2000s boom (Espinosa Ruiz 2014), which paradoxically look more derelict than the older, but renovated, historic part of the city.

Perhaps more contentiously, the devastation provoked by wars and genocides can be regarded the result of the business as usual of supermodernity. Considering their number and frequency in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it is obvious that they cannot be seen as a mere dysfunction. Rather, they are well integrated into the system and, in the case of genocide, they can even be understood as a logical step in the development of high modern ideologies (Bauman 1997; Arendt 2004). This forces us to see the vestiges of extermination centres and mass graves not as unique and sublime, but as banal—the object perhaps of industrial, rather than conflict, archaeology.

## Autophagy

A second type of ruin that is related to the normal operation of the supermodern era has to do with its autophagic character. By autophagy, I understand what is more commonly known as “creative destruction” (Penrose 2017), the term popularised by Schumpeter (1975 [1942]: 82–85), which also covers what I have described as ruins of operation.

Schumpeter defined creative destruction as a process of “industrial mutation—if I may use that biological term—that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one”. I prefer autophagy because it captures more effectively the cannibalistic aspect of capitalism (“endocannibalism” could be another term) and has less optimistic resonances. In fact, supermodernity could well be described as “cannibal modernity”, which is manifested at best in a political economy of predation (González-Ruibal 2015) that threatens eating away itself and the world. The purpose of autophagy in biology is not as much elimination as recycling, insofar as processed materials are used for producing new building blocks and energy for cellular renovation and homeostasis. Most societies can be said to practice autophagy: certain practices and elements are discarded and then recycled into the system to create something new. This is part of the dynamic existence of culture.

However, the autophagy of our era is different for several reasons: it is one of the leading processes of change rather than a marginal phenomenon (as Schumpeter notices so well); the elements that are the object of elimination are likewise not marginal to the system but often economically primordial and symbolically central, and the process does not lead to recycling as much as to pure annihilation. It is a digestion in which everything or almost everything ends as waste—what Walter Benjamin described so powerfully with his Angel of History piling wreckage upon wreckage in front of its feet. Autophagy includes processes of expansion that entail destruction (industrial space that grows, demolishing earlier factories and building new ones), but leave no ruins behind. Consider the case of Hollywood: of the early studios and movie theatres virtually nothing remains (Bahn 2014), as they have been devoured by the very success of the business.

At times, however, autophagic processes eat, digest and discard infrastructures, technologies and materialities that have been at the heart of modernity from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century and leave them in ruins, as new models of economy, leisure time or sociability emerge in their place. Self-cannibalising often leaves a trail of detritus, of things that cannot be properly digested and put back in operation, simply because the material assemblage that has been superseded is too complex, extensive and expensive to dismantle. In large parts of the world, for instance, factories and railways which were the epitome of heavy modernity (Bauman 2000) are now but fields of ruins, replaced by the technologies of liquid modernity. An excellent example of this kind of autophagy is provided by cinemas.

Cinema was a revolutionary cultural phenomenon during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and it figures prominently in theoretical reflections of the period, for example in Benjamin’s famous essay “The work of art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (Benjamin 1968). Cinema was revolutionary also in social terms. Cinemas were spaces of socialisation, symbols of progress and modernity, and places where ideology was both reproduced and challenged. Cinema was also an immensely destructive force. Walter Benjamin (1968: 221) argued that the social significance of cinema could not be grasped “without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural legacy”. It took only one century, however, for this destructive phenomenon to become destroyed itself, at least the spaces where films were shown and that were an integral part of the cinematic experience (Figure 2.5). Today, a large percentage of theatres all over the world lie in ruins or have been transformed into something else. Abandoned theatres are a staple of urban exploration<sup>2</sup> and the focus of artistic projects. They were indeed creators of ruins.

**FIGURE 2.5** Ruins of autophagy: a great producer of modernity devoured by modernity—a cinema abandoned in Tanah Merah, a quarter of Sandakan, Malaysia. Photo by CEphoto, Uwe Aranas. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sandakan\\_Sabah\\_Abandonned-cinema-in-Tanah-Merah-02.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sandakan_Sabah_Abandonned-cinema-in-Tanah-Merah-02.jpg)



Modernity's autophagy often preys on more humane forms of modernity, which are then digested as heritage or simply discarded. Houses and neighbourhoods built at a human scale from Chile to China during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are now demolished or left abandoned, as behemoths of glass and steel replace them (Mullins 2017: 244–246) (Figure 2.6). The modern city, in fact, can be considered the main victim of supermodernity's autophagy. Thus, it has been often remarked how Los Angeles, Indianapolis and other American metropolises continuously cannibalise and erase their past (Klein 1997; Mullins 2017), whereas Shanghai has been described as a “city without ruins”, after extensive demolition programs cleared 70 million square metres of residential space (Ren 2014). The Haussmanian metropolis, with its wide boulevards, its *flâneurs* and lively street life has been superseded by the fragmented cosmopolis of the twenty-first century, with its inward-looking gated communities and expressways (Caldeira 1996: 314–315; see Chapter 7). The decay and abandonment of downtown buildings, in fact, can be considered a process of autophagic ruination. Supermodern cities have ruined earlier modern lifestyles and neighbourhoods in other ways. Multi-ethnic communities, from the United States to South Africa, which were the product of early colonial capitalism, have often been wiped out by further waves of “progress” (Hall 2001; Praetzelis et al. 2007; Ryzewski 2017). Modern utopian initiatives have been another victim of modernity's autophagy (Tarlow 2002; Preucel and Pendery 2006; Baxter 2012; Kruczek-Aaron 2014). Whether reformist or socialist, a certain element of utopianism was present in most, as the promoters believed at least in the possibility of improving human life within the limits of capitalist modernity (Breen 2006: 46). Even some projects that lacked any utopian content were made look humane by contrast with later forms of capitalist exploitation; thus, the present residents of Fordlândia, a failed company town in the Amazon, see the ruins of the scheme with nostalgia, particularly when they compare it with the abuses committed by agribusinesses under a new regime of predatory capitalism (Grandin 2009).



**FIGURE 2.6** An abandoned house of the early twentieth century in Santiago de Chile, under the shadow of an apartment block. Author's photograph.



## ■ Failure

Most ruins can be considered failures. They are, at least, evidence of the inability to maintain an object, a place, or a system as alive and working. Yet, as I have tried to show in the previous sections, many ruins are better not conceptualised as failures, since this gives the false impression that things could be otherwise (that copper mining can be conducted without producing devastated landscapes or that capitalism can work without financial crises). By failures, I refer to projects that do not succeed, often despite strong investments and quite unexpectedly, or that succeed for a while and then collapse due to an error or a chain of errors. Examples of the

former are failed development and social engineering projects, of the kind studied by James C. Scott (1998); examples of the latter are nuclear meltdowns and aircraft crashes. Those are commonly referred to as “disasters” and I will keep the term here (Gould 2007), reserving “catastrophe” for those disasters in which a non-human, nontechnical element plays the leading role (see below). Let us begin with disasters.

The ruins of Chernobyl-Pripyat are perhaps the most popular allegory of supermodern disaster, because they represent the perfect combination of a modernist ideology of progress at all costs, faith in technology and oppressive power. From the point of view of archaeology, the far-reaching material effects of the meltdown are perhaps more interesting. Damage caused to the reactors of Chernobyl and Fukushima Daiichi did not affect a limited place only—that of the power plants themselves—but created large ruination zones provoked by the effects of radioactivity. In Fukushima, the area scheduled for decontamination covers 2,400 square kilometres, the size of Luxembourg (Schlanger et al. 2016: 417). Not only that, whereas fires or earthquakes per se rarely prevent reconstruction in their aftermath, fallout does: landscapes ruined by radioactivity, as in the case of Chernobyl, may remain ruined forever—at least in human terms, as other forms of life colonise the abandoned landscape. Nuclear disasters expose the fragile fabric of supermodernity in different ways. On the one hand, they show the imbalance in contemporary technology: while power plants are marvels of technical ingenuity, the procedures for clearing away the ruins, rubble and debris produced by the disaster are surprisingly premodern and involve a lot of basic manual work (Schlanger et al. 2016: 418)—the same can be said of oil spills and other disasters involving supermodern chemicals. On the other hand, the ruins of nuclear plants make visible what usually remains unseen: Schlanger et al. (2016: 422) note how Fukushima Daiichi, which functioned so smoothly as to be invisible, was a kind of “non-place” during decades of operation until it broke down and became hypervisible. Lisa Le Feuvre (2010: 15) has noted that sometimes we can only pay attention to things when they fail—an idea of Heideggerian resonances. Ruins of failure are perhaps the only way in which we can truly see supermodern technology.

More conventional disasters may lend themselves less easily to archaeological reflection, even if archaeology can be extremely useful in recording forensic evidence (Gould 2007). Nevertheless, as happens with other kinds of failure, accidents can still be revealing of the nature of our era. Consider an airplane crash. Nothing exposes better the intricate and excessive materiality of an aircraft as a disaster, but also its ultimate simplicity, its banal materiality. The overabundance of things spread on the ground that constitutes the characteristic image of a crash, tragically discloses the way in which human lives—their affects and intimacies materialised in personal properties—are intermingled with the most advanced technology. Perhaps one of the reasons we feel so disturbed by this image is because of the way the ruins of the airplane materially manifest our fragility, as individual human beings and as an industrial civilisation, our vital dependency on things, on which we put all our faith. I use the term “dependency” following Hodder (2012: 18), who describes it as any sort of dependence that involves constraints and a limitation of the ability of people to develop as societies or individuals.

Whereas a nuclear power plant or an airplane work for a while before failing, some projects never manage to function properly and in this way expose the failures of high modern ideologies as a whole (Scott 1998). Modernist dreams—capitalist, fascist and socialist—have often ended up in ruins. Fascism offers a plethora of failed projects. Housing schemes that were developed in Sicily during Mussolini’s time to colonise the countryside were abandoned after a very short occupation (Samuels 2010). Fascism resorted to disciplined, orthogonal plans and serial, rationalist architecture in their social housing developments, both in Italy and

Spain (Ojeda Rivera and Villa Díaz 2005; Caprotti 2007). It is not often sufficiently appraised that one of the reasons these schemes failed to take off is because of a visceral rejection of their materiality. They intended to change peasant mentality through the physicality of the built space, but this was met with stiff resistance by those affected, who were too attached to their old home and the sensorial and social experiences that they granted (even when new houses could be portrayed as objectively better). Fascism understood that to disassemble traditional peasants, they had to detach them from their vernacular houses, but the modernist project of purification and separation was never really achieved. What became disassembled in the end was not the traditional collective, but the modernist dream.

Similar examples can be found in the communist world. A typical case is the Tana-Beles project in Ethiopia (González-Ruibal 2006b), which was in operation between 1988 and 1991. Its ruins are just one of the many vestiges of real socialism that can be seen in Ethiopia today, from collective farms to Soviet tanks (Figure 2.7). Tana-Beles was a \$300 million investment that intended to make the lowlands of western Ethiopia, sparsely inhabited by a group of slash-and-burn cultivators (the Gumuz), into a highly profitable space, capable of doubling Ethiopia's hydroelectric power and of increasing its food production exponentially. For achieving those goals, 80,000 peasants from the Ethiopian highlands were resettled and 75,000 hectares of forest felled down. The project included a rice-processing factory, a pipe factory, a plastics factory, a clinic, guest houses with swimming pool, office buildings, housing for workers, a meeting hall and even an airport. It was an utter failure. Thousands of peasants died of malaria and other diseases and production goals were never remotely achieved. With the collapse of the communist regime, the scheme stopped functioning. In my visits

**FIGURE 2.7** Ruins of a failure: the derelict gas station of the Tana-Beles project, Ethiopia, with empty containers in the background. Author's photograph.





between 2003 and 2006, the place offered a post-apocalyptic sight, but not a dreadful one. The apocalypse had already been. What I saw was the return of a former world and another order—more humane, in many ways, at a human scale, at any rate. Villages of bamboo and thatch had emerged in between empty office buildings, overgrown gardens and collapsing factories. Failed supermodernity seemed not so much as destructive as utterly absurd and contingent in Tana-Beles. This is perhaps the truth that is revealed in its ruins—in all failed modernist schemes.

Failed projects are of course not exclusive of totalitarian regimes. Capitalism has produced at least as many ruins as communism and fascism, often for very similar reasons. The ruins of Fordlândia that have already been mentioned (Grandin 2009) provide a paradigmatic example. In 1929, Ford Motor Company acquired 76,000 acres of land in the Amazon forest with the purpose of transforming the wilderness into an ordered space of production. The idea was to export the industrial model that had succeeded in the United States to Brazil (Barkermeyer and Figger 2011). A large tract of land was deforested and a company town constructed with residential buildings, schools, a hospital, shops and other facilities, including a golf course. The project soon failed and was abandoned; the company town is now an overgrown ruin. The failure has been attributed to a variety of factors, including the lack of local workers, pests, the soil and the terrain, all of which boils down to a mixture of modern hubris and poor planning. What works in North America does not necessarily work in Amazonia. But even in the United States, ambitious capitalist projects often failed to succeed, as proved by the case of Pullman's company town, which operated during the last two decades of the nineteenth century near Chicago. Jane Baxter (2012: 661–662) has cogently argued that the town itself, its material fabric and organisation, created circumstances that fostered discontent: it alienated workers from similar communities elsewhere, isolated them, suggested that their values were undesirable and inferior, and at the same time offered them the opportunity to envision themselves as a collective, which resulted in actions against the company.

In fact, it is not necessary to go to tropical forests to find monuments to the failure of modernity. There are so many ruins of failure in the West that sometimes they pass unnoticed. This is the case with what Robert Smithson (2011 [1967]) famously called “ruins in reverse”, by which he referred to buildings that were still under construction but already undergoing entropic processes. In the artist's words, a ruin in reverse “is the opposite of the ‘romantic ruin’ because the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built”. Ruins in reverse are an intrinsic part of many urban landscapes, to the point that it is sometimes difficult even to identify them as ruins or as failures. Which schemes end up failing can be more indicative of specific ideologies, cultural values and desires than those that are finally completed. In the case of Spain, construction projects that have failed more often are airports, highways, high-speed railways and suburban housing projects. The first three are related to the traditional obsession of Spaniards with geographical isolation: living in a fractured landscape in the south-western corner of Europe led many to think that progress equals connectivity. This provoked an onrush of transport facilities which acquired absurd proportions before the 2008 financial crisis, after which many infrastructures were left abandoned or semi-abandoned. Ruins in reverse of suburban housing, in turn, speak of greed, of course, but also of the social aspirations of the low-middle classes and the impact of American culture in their collective imagination. Architect Julia Schulz-Dornburg (2012) has photographed many failed housing projects in Spain. She eschews the irony of *Incompiuto Siciliano* to focus on bold visual critique. In her

images, she chooses the schemes where the excess of modernity and the greed of capitalism are more conspicuous: residential developments defacing pristine landscapes or built in impossible locations (steep slopes, deserts). Another architect, Pablo Arboleda (2018), after visiting one of the most ambitious housing development projects of the boom, the phantom city of Seseña, near Madrid, makes an interesting point: the place is considered a failure because it is largely a ruin, a place in the middle of nowhere that failed to attract residents and therefore to fulfil the function for which it was conceived. However, Arboleda argues that they could be considered a failure even if they did fulfil such a function:

considering the way of life that these buildings supposedly advocate for, I do not perceive the fact that they are increasingly inhabited a success at all . . . they are ruins so long as they host ruined lives: they are ruins come what may.

(Arboleda 2018: 226)

## ■ Catastrophe

Catastrophes, from earthquakes to volcanoes, have been studied by archaeologists for decades. So what is specific about supermodern catastrophes? The main difference is the relationship between human and nonhuman elements in the origin, development and outcome of catastrophic events (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999). The “metabiotic assemblage in excess of monstrosity” (Witmore forthcoming a) characteristic of the contemporary era produces unique catastrophes, which can no longer be called “natural”, as a Pleistocene earthquake or a Middle Holocene wildfire caused by lightning could be. They are social phenomena—in an extended sense of the “social” (Webmoor 2007) that includes both humans and nonhumans—very much like the taphonomic processes that take place in their aftermath (Dawdy 2006). Consider the case of Hurricane Katrina. The hurricane itself is a natural event, typical of the Intertropical Convergence Zone. The catastrophe that it provoked, instead, had everything to do with supermodernity—with a particular economic regime, technologies for controlling and subduing nature, politics, class, race and a modernist worldview. This supermodern metabiotic assemblage is much more lethal for human and nonhuman life than the pre-colonial indigenous assemblage that existed in the area a thousand years before.

If need be, the difference between supermodern and nonmodern assemblages was adamantly demonstrated with the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Here, the tracts of coast that had been subjected to more intensive supermodern exploitation (from shrimp farms to tourist resorts) were those that suffered most, due to the clearing of protective mangrove forests (Dahdouh-Guebas et al. 2005; Alongi 2008). In contrast, indigenous populations, both in the Indian and the Pacific oceans (McAdoo et al. 2009) have been shown to suffer much less from tsunamis than members of the dominant society and immigrants, due to their traditional knowledge and attitude to the environment. Vernacular architecture is also an excellent example of a form of materiality that minimises the impact of natural catastrophes. In the Andes, Inca architecture was much better suited to seismic hazards than Spanish colonial and later buildings (Oliver-Smith 1999: 77–83). After the conquest, changes in settlement patterns and the colonial extractive economy exacerbated the impact of “natural” disasters. Thus, the destructiveness of the Great Peruvian Earthquake of 1700, which claimed 70,000 lives and destroyed 160,000 buildings, cannot be understood without the spatial technologies of colonial modernity that had replaced pre-Columbian ones (Oliver-Smith 1999: 84–86).

The meltdown of Fukushima is representative of the way in which the supermodern assemblage amplifies manifold natural phenomena. Here, the devastation of the gigantic wave was multiplied by radioactivity, which expands destruction, as we saw, in two ways: geographically (nuclear pollution forces the evacuation of large areas) and temporally (due to the lasting effects of radiation). Schlanger et al. suggest that archaeology can “highlight the specificities of this particular destruction event, initiated by natural forces but then amplified so unexpectedly . . . to unprecedented proportions by the nuclear accident, reaching deep into the socio-technical fabric of late industrial modernity” (Schlanger et al. 2016: 421).

The examples mentioned above, important as they are, remain exceptional, but similar catastrophes occur at a smaller scale almost on a daily basis: from houses built on alluvial plains that are flooded, to mudslides. The high death toll and extensive destruction of the latter have to do with the occupation of dangerous slopes that had never been settled before due to their inadequacy for human habitation. It is the lower classes that suffer the most, both because it is the poor who usually build in these marginal terrains—the only space available for them—and because their flimsy architecture is easily prey to natural disasters (Oliver 2003: 144–148). In addition, some of the mudslides are provoked by torrential rains unleashed by El Niño. Albeit the phenomenon has existed for a very long time and prehistoric societies are known to have adapted and changed according to its effects (Van Buren 2001), Anthropocene climate change has made things worse. Lutz Koepnick (1993: 134) has argued in his discussion of Gianbattista Vico that, for the philosopher, to be civilised is not just to create a clearing (the foundational act of civilisation), but also to respect the otherness of the forest. In the modern attitude against nature, Vico identified the roots of a new form of barbarism which would foster violence and turn history into nature again. Ruins of catastrophe are the ruins of history becoming nature.

## ■ Annihilation

Annihilation is any process of complete obliteration—of either life or matter. The idea of annihilation—of destruction beyond destruction—is very present in high modernist ideologies. “The destructive character”, wrote Benjamin (1978: 301), “is young and cheerful. For destroying rejuvenates in clearing away the traces of our own age; it cheers because everything cleared away means to the destroyer a complete reduction, indeed eradication, of his own condition”. Benjamin refers to presentist annihilation, which is typical of the supermodern era. In fact, what many vanguard artists and totalitarian ideologues of the first third of the twentieth century fantasised with achieving was not so much reducing the old world to ruins as completely eradicating it from the face of the earth, as if it had never existed. Marinetti’s manifesto is the most famous expression of this attitude toward the past, but on the other side of the political spectrum futurist calls to annihilation also existed. Thus Maiakovsky:

We / cannot just fantasize / about the new order / but have to dynamite the old . . . /  
with heat / with burning, / with iron, / with light; / scorch, / burn, / cut, / raze! . . . / If  
it’s old—kill it. / Use their skulls as ashtrays! / In a savage rout / we’ll wash away the  
old / and thunder a new / myth across the world. / We’ll kick down the fence of time.  
(cited in Steinberg 2017: 337)

Archaeologists know that complete erasure is extremely difficult to achieve, as almost everything leaves traces. However, high modernism has often managed to “kick down the

fence of time” successfully, reducing the materiality of the world and its memory to almost nothing. Two elements materialise the politics of annihilation of the contemporary era particularly well: rubble and ashes.

Huyssen (2006: 20) has written that the real disasters of the twentieth century have left rubble rather than ruins. Rubble is what remains of old Königsberg, sealed under the new Soviet city, or of the Warsaw Ghetto in Muradów, which causes a slightly higher elevation of the post-war buildings in relation to other structures in the vicinity (Sturdy Colls 2015: 313). For Gordillo (2014: 254–257), rubble is an index of negativity, a material trace of the “surplus of violence and destruction” characteristic of the expansion of capitalism and empire. His privileging of the term “rubble” rather than “ruin” is not innocent: it intends to avoid the fetishistic and aesthetic connotations of the latter. Rubble, indeed, not ruins is what resulted from the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory near Dhaka, Bangladesh, which killed thousands of underpaid workers of the global textile industry (Weizman 2014: 17–18). Rubble is of course not exclusive of supermodernity or capitalism, as any field archaeologist knows: it is what remains of wall collapse. What is specific of the contemporary era again, is its proliferation, its volume—the bombing of Cologne left 24 million cubic metres of debris (Diefendorf 1993: 27), 400 million cubic metres in all of Germany (Friedrich 2008: 168)—the politics behind its production and particularly the speed with which it is produced. Fast debris is made possible by the development of certain technologies—such as high explosive and bulldozers—which can reduce a town to rubble in just a few days or flatten a building complex in minutes.

Bulldozers, in particular, are a primary producer of destruction and therefore great creators of the archaeological record in the contemporary era. In Brazil and the Chaco,

**FIGURE 2.8** Annihilation: on the island of Corisco, Equatorial Guinea, the rainforest has been cleared for the construction of an airport and the ground dug by bulldozers two metres in depth, removing all archaeological deposits from the contemporary era to the Stone Age. Author's photograph.



forests and villages are bulldozed over to clear the land for soya plantations (Grandin 2009: 367–368; Gordillo 2014: 129–130), leaving virtually no traces behind. In Palestine, these machines have been systematically used since the second Intifada as a military weapon—and consciously so (Graham 2002: 645)—with the purpose of demolishing and clearing away large built areas. They are also a political tool, which deletes almost all evidence of previous human habitation, crushing buildings and reducing them to a homogenous mass. This facilitates later colonisation or the creation of security zones—flat fields of debris easy to police (Graham 2002: 646–647). In this way, bulldozers are also producers of oblivion: of the history of a place and of the reasons for its destruction (Gordillo 2014: 259). The Taliban and the Islamic State have also made extensive use of both bulldozers and high explosive to annihilate the past and cleanse cultural diversity, thus aligning themselves with supermodern regimes, rather than with medieval societies (see also Harmanşah 2015). This not only happens in the context of war, but also in post-conflict scenarios—the rich past of Beirut was annihilated during rebuilding (Lefèvre 1995), and the reconstruction of German cities equalled to a second liquidation of the country's history (Sebald 2003: 16–17). Even in everyday situations, bulldozers excavate well beyond the depth of archaeological levels, razing all historical traces of previous occupations: for the construction of an international airport in the tiny island of Corisco, Equatorial Guinea, bulldozers dug out 30 per cent of the island, destroying in the process dozens of archaeological sites, among the richest in Central Africa, covering some two thousand years of occupation (González-Ruibal 2015). The deep and rich cultural stratigraphy was replaced by a void of sand sealed in asphalt and concrete (Figure 2.8).

The spatiality of supermodern rubble is also meaningful. Since the First World War, debris has been more often displaced than built over. In Madrid, many neighbourhoods were heavily shelled during the Spanish Civil War and, after the conflict in 1939, the bombed buildings were demolished and the materials spread in the nearby parks. The operation fulfilled a double function: it contributed to the fast clearing of the ruined city and at the same time obliterated the material memory of the war by covering its scars (trenches, craters and fortifications surrounding the capital) (González-Ruibal 2016a: 81–85). Rubble, as has been pointed out, is a creator of oblivion. The situation was similar in Germany after the Second World War. Construction debris here was also taken out of the inner city and dumped into canals (Hamburg), sinkholes (Essen), parks (Cologne, Berlin, Munich) and runways (Berlin) (Diefendorf 1993: 26–27). The fate of rubble in this case can be related to the politics of forgetting that prevailed in Germany after the war, which was the only imaginable way to survive psychologically (Sebald 2003; Sandler 2016: 201). In Britain, bombings also produced colossal amounts of waste; proof of the unique supermodern capacity for disassembling, reassembling and displacing matter is the debris from Bristol that was taken as ballast to New York by Liberty ships during the Second World War. Parts of New York are now filled with medieval remains from Old Europe (Burström 2017b: 61–67).

Again, a war is not a prerequisite for massive displacements of rubble and archaeological deposits; whereas buildings have been historically built on the remains of previous constructions (the paradigmatic case are the Near Eastern *tells*), supermodernity hollows out the foundations of the city and displaces its matter, transformed into shapeless rubble, to places outside the urban limits. Memories are likewise fragmented and displaced to the margins and sinkholes of the collective consciousness. In the supermodern age, war, disasters and reconstructions, which have actually helped to preserve urban memories in the past by



creating thick archaeological layers, are now carriers of amnesia—another manifestation of the post-mnemonic regime of modernity (Connerton 2009).

Complete destruction is further achieved by the processing of rubble: construction debris is usually crushed and mixed and in some cases reduced to a sort of uniform gravel that can then be employed for laying foundations or modifying topographies. Yet even rubble can foster new ecosystems. After the Second World War, the subfield of urban ecology developed in Germany to study the environments that emerged in bombed, abandoned quarters (Lachmund 2003). These plants belonged to ruderal species, which are the first to colonise disturbed lands (such as roadsides and rail tracks). In fact, “ruderal” comes from *rudus* in Latin, meaning “rubble”. Although most cities were cleared of rubble by the mid-1950s, some marginal areas in West Berlin preserved many empty lots covered with debris where ruderals proliferated. These lots became first the object of scientific inquiry and then of activism, when ecologists demanded the wastelands to be transformed into urban parks—which was, by the way, an idea cherished by some Nazi architects (Diefendorf 1993: 173; Sebald 2003: 49–50). French botanists have introduced the concept of “obsidional species” to refer to those plants that appear as a result of environmental disturbances caused by war. Obsidional and ruderal plants have been investigated in villages shattered to pieces during the First World War as well as in battlefields (Steinbach 2011). Sometimes the settlements have been razed to such an extent that only the plants that cover the rubble, invisible under the turf, bear witness of their existence today.

Although rubble can be seen as the epitome of destruction, this does not mean that archaeology should content itself with documenting the damage that has been done—the irreparable void. In some cases, it is possible to find life amid the debris (not only of the botanical kind). Leila Papoli Yazdi and her team have been able to reconstruct the lives of individuals and families annihilated during the brutal earthquake of 2003 in Iran that affected the historic city of Bam, killed 43,000 people and destroyed 70,000 of the buildings in the centre (Papoli Yazdi 2010; Dezhmakhoo and Papoli Yazdi 2010, 2013). They excavated several houses that had been reduced to rubble and retold the stories of their former inhabitants using the material evidence that was preserved under the collapse. In Iran, many aspects of life (sex, leisure, or politics) have to be concealed from public view. The destruction caused by the earthquake paradoxically revealed a truth: that of the hidden lives of ordinary Iranians often so divergent from official ideology (Papoli Yazdi 2010; Dezhmakhoo and Papoli Yazdi 2013). In other contexts, it is much more difficult to reconstruct individual lives, but this does not mean that archaeology is useless for this reason. The ruins of Belchite in Spain offer proof of what archaeology can contribute even in cases of extreme destruction. The town of Belchite was besieged and bombed during the Spanish Civil War and never reconstructed. The dictatorship wanted the ruins to be a memorial of the war and of the “martyrs” who died defending the place, a sort of Oradour-sûr-Glâne *avant la lettre* and subjected to the same conservation problems (Olivier 2001). The problem is that after eighty years of abandonment, ruins have become an amorphous mass of rubble which has been cleared many times, moved, dumped in different places and spread around. The thorough destruction of the town, however, offered an unlikely revelation of its hidden history during survey (González-Ruibal 2016a: 136–137). The mixture of ancient and modern artefacts, all reduced to fragments, bears witness to the destructive capacity of our era; it is not just the present that is annihilated, but as Walter Benjamin noted, “*even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins*” (1968: 255; original emphasis) (Figure 2.9).



**FIGURE 2.9** Annihilation: all that is left of the town of Belchite—partially destroyed during the Spanish Civil War and then turned into rubble by abandonment—is a world in fragments. Author's photograph.



The notion of rubble is culture-specific and therefore cannot be used as shorthand for total destruction. Japanese houses made of paper and bamboo left little rubble during the Second World War, if compared to their European counterparts, and the same can be said of most sub-Saharan African settlements constructed with perishable materials: colonial raids and postcolonial wars have obliterated them, reducing them to ashes or amorphous layers of mud, as in Sudan and Ethiopia (Prins 2008; Weizman and Weizman 2014: 112–115). It can be argued that ashes are to organic matter what rubble is to buildings: they are the extreme form of annihilation of matter of which supermodernity is capable. The annihilation of forests during the First World War (Nietschmann 1990), counter-guerrilla warfare (Van Etten et al. 2008) and pyro-terrorism (Baird 2006) produce ashes, not rubble. In the First World War, 600,000 hectares of forest were burnt down in France, of which 166,000 were so destroyed and polluted that they could not be reused until the 1980s (Kramer 2007: 314). Books and manuscripts succumb to the same fate as trees during conflicts: they literally vanish, leaving no trace (Polastron 2007).

The annihilation of human beings turns them to ashes as well: after the bombing of Hamburg with incendiary bombs in 1943 the mortuary remains of entire families could be transported in a single basket (Sebald 2003: 38). But there are other forms of thoroughly destructing bodies, which resemble the production of rubble. The twentieth century was inaugurated with the mass disintegration of people: most of the casualties during the First World War were due to artillery fire, which fragmented bodies to an unprecedented scale. The new status of the dead body is eloquently manifested in archaeological excavations (Desfossés et al. 2008: 70–71). In the exhumations conducted in a cemetery next to a German military hospital, archaeologists unearthed many bodies that had undergone amputations. For fear of gangrene, amputations were applied generously, even for a broken leg.<sup>3</sup> The dismemberment of bodies

by artillery fire was followed in later wars by the purposeful disarticulation, fragmentation and dispersal of corpses, either as a form of post-mortem punishment or as a way of concealing evidence (Skinner et al. 2002). Disarticulated bones litter the surface of modern battlefields, extermination camps (Gilead et al. 2010) and killing fields (Haglund et al. 2001; Kouyoumdjian and Siméone 2005) and become an archaeological signature of the supermodern era. In a specific area of the Battle of the Ebro, which was the major military encounter of the Spanish Civil War, an archaeological surface survey identified 394 human bones belonging to at least 35 individuals—70 years after the battle.<sup>4</sup> More recently, terrorism has taken the disintegrated body to new levels, reinforcing the parallel between rubble and dismembered bodies: in scenarios of terrorist attacks, it is difficult to distinguish human from non-human debris. Shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (or 9/11), archaeologist Richard Gould (2007: 27–28) visited the area around Ground Zero and found bits of human bone mixed with ashy dust from the collapse of the twin towers of the World Trade Center: “The largest piece I saw that day was between two and three inches across and appeared to be part of a human scapula.”

Human ashes, however, are the epitome of supermodern destruction: the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis. This is the most extreme form of annihilation: people turned into smoke. As the number of victims increased, new methods for the disposal of the dead had to be devised and crematoria were thus built. These have been retrieved archaeologically (Sturdy Colls 2015: 35). However, despite their apparently ethereal nature, ashes can also be documented archaeologically, both in crematoria (Gilead et al. 2009: 19) and in the mass graves dug during the early phases of the genocide (Kola 2000). Not even supermodern technologies can reduce large masses of human matter to nothing (Gould 2007: 34): in the controversial boreholes made by Andrzej Kola (2000) in Bełżec, remains of human fat, carbonised human remains and ashes were discovered, which permitted the identification of 33 of the camp’s mass graves, one of them covering over 2,000 square metres. There are some precedents to the mass assassinations and cremations of the Second World War. During the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, in the summer of 1936, the Nationalist Army killed thousands of prisoners, both military and civilians, during its advance toward Madrid. In several cases, the bodies were later incinerated. When archaeologists dug the mass graves of Mérida (Badajoz), they found very few bones and all of them very fragmented, but they could document traces of ashes and small objects that had survived the burning (Muñoz Encinar 2016: 157–176). The cremation of bodies during the contemporary era represents a way of dealing with growing masses of corpses and of erasing atrocities, as the international reaction against war crimes intensified throughout the twentieth century. Reducing matter to ashes or rubble, then, is not just an innocent after-effect of supermodernity’s technical means, but a technique in itself for producing oblivion, which is the destruction of memory. Annihilation is, first and foremost, a political act.

## ■ Summary

This chapter has dealt with the archaeological traces of the contemporary era, from the turn of the twentieth century to the present. I have examined different types of ruins, failures and wastelands provoked by the work of excessive modernity. In particular, I have examined six types of ruination processes: systemic collapse, systemic operation, autophagy, failure, catastrophe and annihilation. Systemic collapse refers to the sudden interruption in the life of society or, more precisely, a working biosociotechnical assemblage, which can be brought about by physical violence or by a combination of political, economic and cultural causes. I have

referred to three specific ruptures in the archaeological record: the end of multi-ethnic, multi-religious societies in Central and Eastern Europe, the wiping-out of indigenous communities all over the world, and the collapse of peasant societies. I have focused on them for three reasons: they do not affect a single site or a specific region, but have a continental or global scale; they mark, in all cases, “changes in material organisations with high irreversibility” (Lucas 2010: 356), as they imply the sudden end of durable systems that in most cases have developed with limited changes for centuries if not millennia, and finally, they are all examples of remnants of premodern worlds that have survived the development of earlier forms of modernity.

Systemic ruination refers to processes of decay and destruction that are inherent to fully operational systems. They cannot be seen as a problem, a failure, or an anomaly, but simply as part of the waste that is produced by the technological processes going on in any society. By technological processes I refer not just to the production of things, but also spaces and subjects. Supermodernity, and capitalist supermodernity in particular, is an extremely wasteful system and therefore produces debris fast and abundantly.

Autophagy can be understood as a subcategory within systemic ruination. The reason that I have singled it out is that it involves specific forms of destruction that are very characteristic of our era. Autophagic ruins are not so much the result of production processes as of the self-cannibalising tendencies of supermodernity. The continuous production of novelty implies the obliteration of even those assemblages and infrastructures that had hitherto epitomised modernity and that were usually still functional. Thus, whereas the ruins of collapse refer usually to premodern assemblages, the ruins of autophagy are the true ruins of modernity. It is modernity devouring itself.

The ruins of failure are mainly the vestiges of modernity’s dream of reason. They are the result of a belief in modernity’s technical and intellectual superiority. There is a risk, however, of seeing in the archaeological remains of failed projects a simple allegory of modern hubris. They are, in fact, the most eloquent exposure of the way in which modernity works, of its weaknesses, defects and dependencies (*sensu* Hodder 2012). As for the “natural” catastrophes of the supermodern age, they are caused both by the lack of respect for the otherness of nature and by the transformation of the world into an artefact (see Chapter 8), which breaks under excessive pressure or misuse.

Yet if we are to find the archaeological record that best represents the nature of our age, we should turn to annihilation. Not ruins, but rubble and ashes: destruction beyond ruination. Modern ideologies and political economies have often aspired to the total obliteration of people, the past, nature, or otherness, or have produced it as a collateral effect when pursuing other aims. But we do not have to limit ourselves to bear witness to the destruction of the world. Everything leaves traces. Even total destruction. Ashes and rubble are also proof of the “whole blood guilt” (Canetti) of our era.

## ■ Notes

- 1 <http://jasonfrancisco.net/alive-and-destroyed-2017> (accessed 17 September 2018).
- 2 [www.derelictlondon.com/cinemas--theatres.html](http://www.derelictlondon.com/cinemas--theatres.html) (accessed 5 February 2017).
- 3 [www.inrap.fr/le-cimetiere-allemand-de-boult-sur-suipe-10845](http://www.inrap.fr/le-cimetiere-allemand-de-boult-sur-suipe-10845) (accessed 7 June 2017).
- 4 [www.catpatrimoni.com/treballs%20realitzats/arqueologia/corberaebre\(Arq\).htm](http://www.catpatrimoni.com/treballs%20realitzats/arqueologia/corberaebre(Arq).htm) (accessed 29 March 2017).

# 3

## Politics

THE THEME OF politics runs throughout this entire book and is essential to the way I do archaeology. It is obvious, for instance, in the definition of the contemporary era that I proposed in Chapter 1 and in the description of the types of ruins of the contemporary era provided in Chapter 2. To say that archaeology is political has become a platitude after the post-processual critique of the 1980s: at that time, it was realised that the production of knowledge “always takes place at a particular time and place in a field of power relations and politics” and that it may have “*effects* as interventions today in the present” (Shanks and Tilley 1987: 114; original emphasis), so I am not going to reiterate these points here. I would rather like to qualify these ideas: postmodernism has expanded the notion of ideology to the point of devaluing it. Not all politics are equally political. As Terry Eagleton (1991: 8) has warned, to make concepts like ideology or political become coextensive with everything means emptying them of force, which is congenial to the ruling order. He argues that the force of the term “ideology” lies in its capacity to discriminate between those power struggles that are central from those who are not.

Thus, a certain (often unconscious) political standpoint explains the topics we decide to study or not to study, but this does not mean that all projects are political per se (or ideological), in the sense of intending to fulfil a political function. Conservative archaeologies, for instance, such as those embracing the culture-historical paradigm, have been the object of most criticism, for their support of nationalism, colonialism, imperialism and so on (Trigger 1984), but the truth is that they have become much less involved in political debates in recent times (except perhaps in Israel: Abu El-Haj 2001). Although they certainly reflect a specific political imagination, their ideological role has been dwindling in most places, as nation-states seem to require less the services of archaeology for legitimation (Brück and Nilsson Stutz 2016). It is ironic that critiques of ideology in the discipline have reached their momentum precisely at a time when archaeology plays a less relevant role in reactionary politics. I would like to distinguish then those archaeologies that reflect a certain ideology, usually the hegemonic one, from those archaeologies that openly take a political stance. My second distinction, which will be the centre of this chapter, is between those archaeologies that espouse a radical or hard form of politics, which does not eschew conflict and disagreement, and those that follow the dominant politics of identity, which I will describe as soft or liberal politics. Radical politics are concerned, among other things, with conflict, dissension, antagonism, political violence, oppression and political economy and class inequalities. Soft politics are more often related to issues of culture, identity and civil rights. The latter have come to occupy virtually the whole spectrum of politics in the social sciences in large parts of North America and northern Europe, what Nancy Fraser (2017) has called “progressive neoliberalism”. Only with the recent wave of reactionary populism have hard politics become centre stage again (González-Ruibal et al. 2018). The difference between hard and

soft politics can also be translated into the concepts of politics and post-politics (Mouffe 2005). For Mouffe (2005: 9), “the political” is the dimension of agonism that is constitutive of human societies, whereas “politics” is “the set of practices and institutions through which order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political”. A truly political approach accepts that conflict is inherent to social life and politics should not try to displace it, but rather enable a public arena where different political projects can be confronted, a space where the political can happen (Mouffe 2005: 3). For Mouffe, a vibrant democracy can only exist based on agonism and the central category of the adversary. The adversary is

the opponent with whom one shares a common allegiance to the democratic principles of “liberty and equality for all”, while disagreeing about their interpretation. Adversaries fight against each other because they want their interpretation of the principles to become hegemonic, but they do not put into question the legitimacy of their opponent’s right to fight for the victory of their position.

(Mouffe 2013: 19)

Post-politics, instead, sacrifices agonism for the sake of consensus. Mouffe accepts that consensus is necessary, but has to be accompanied by dissent (Mouffe 2013: 13). This is what she calls “conflictual consensus”. When conflictual consensus is substituted by the “consensus of the centre”, violent forms of antagonism take centre stage: from reactionary populism to sectarian violence and civil war. Most importantly, for Mouffe (2013: 25) “What characterizes democratic politics is the confrontation between conflicting hegemonic projects, a confrontation with no possibility of final reconciliation.” Post-politics are manifested in different ways in the public arena and in academia, including cosmopolitanism (Mouffe 2013: 27–29), multiculturalism (Žižek 1997) and multivocality (Žižek 2002), all of which are concepts that have enjoyed success in archaeology.

In this chapter, I will examine the problems that I see with the political attitude of mainstream archaeology, which can be described as liberal or soft politics. Then I will review several strategies that contemporary archaeology develops, or can develop, to make political interventions in order to redress the post-political tendencies of the discipline and return to a more radical or hard political line. It is important to note that this is not a dichotomy and that I see both soft and hard political elements in the work of the same archaeologists or at least the possibility of remobilising as radical politics what are presented as just soft interventions. Also, I would like to clarify that I do not see political commitment or the defence of a specific political struggle as criteria to assess the quality or usefulness of science. Quite the opposite: I would prefer to take archaeology (and history) outside the realm of the moral (White 1980: 27) in which politics are embedded, at least when it comes to the epistemic evaluation of archaeological work. The blending of morality and knowledge on which much political archaeology is predicated makes it often impervious to critique, which is neither good for science nor for politics.

## The soft politics of contemporary archaeology

My argument is that hard politics have lost steam and have been replaced by soft, liberal politics or post-politics, through a series of manoeuvres: the embracing of multivocality and reconciliation; participation in the multiculturalist logic; the abandonment of universalism;



the celebration of choice and the rise of neomaterialist paradigms (STS, Actor-Network Theory, object-oriented ontology). I will unpack these different phenomena and then will outline some more productive ways in which archaeology can face the political challenges of the present. I would like to emphasise that my problem with liberal politics in archaeology is obviously not that they exist—needless to say, I am totally for political pluralism and find liberalism a legitimate way of engaging with the past—but with the fact that they have tended to present themselves as *the* political approach par excellence and to occupy all the space of critique.

### *Multivocality and the politics of reconciliation*

Multivocality has been embraced in archaeology as a way of conducting a more ethical and socially engaged practice for over two decades. There has been some awareness as to the dangers of letting multiple voices speak (Hodder 2008) and most people have opted for a version of multivocality that actually discriminates between different discourses and interpretations of the past (Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2007; Trigger 2008; Pluciennik 2015). Trigger (2008: 190), referring to narratives that incite to sectarian violence, goes as far as to say that some voices must be “resolutely suppressed”. I completely agree with this stance, having worked for many years in a context where many are ready to defend political violence and dictatorship. Still, in most cases, multivocality is the excuse to embrace forms of soft politics that eschew structural inequality and conflict. It is my impression that archaeologists do not pay enough attention to the fact that some voices speak louder than others (but see Pluciennik 2015), due to structural sociopolitical differences upon which practitioners have little influence: Ian Hodder’s voice will be always heard over that of the villagers of Çatal Höyük, no matter how much he strives to democratise narratives. The problem, as Terry Eagleton has noted, is not the open dialogue of differences, which is desirable; the problem is to believe that such a dialogue “could ever be adequately conducted in a class-divided society, where what counts as an acceptable interest in the first place is determined by the ruling power” (Eagleton 1991: 175).

Trying to circumvent structural inequalities is particularly difficult in conflict situations. Thus, talking about heritage and reconciliation in the Israeli–Palestine conflict (Scham and Yahya 2003) sounds like a joke when power asymmetries are so enormous: “Though we tried to avoid the political discussion”—says a Palestinian archaeologist, referring to a meeting between Israeli and Palestinian practitioners—“some hot topics had been raised . . . So what about Palestinians who are united being occupied, collectively punished, struggling to achieve their rights of land and independence” (Scham and Yahya 2003: 411). In the fractured situation of Northern Ireland, multivocality also meets insurmountable obstacles. Audrey Horning and colleagues believe that heritage can be used in the “joint recovery of narratives” (Horning et al. 2015: 18). Focusing on the plantation process, they argue that archaeology shows that relations between natives and newcomers were complex and ambiguous and do not support sectarian hatred in the present. Horning and colleagues suggest that archaeological evidence of the plantation process reveals that relations between natives and newcomers were complex and ambiguous and do not support the sectarian hatred of the present. It is debatable, however, whether recovering narratives will fulfil the aspirations of either group involved in the conflict. Also, downplaying the existence of conflict in the past may not necessarily be conducive to greater mutual understanding in the present. After all,



the Kingdom of England did conquer Ireland and the country was colonised by Protestant settlers. That the colonisation did not occur in the way it is imagined by Irish nationalists does not negate the fact.

Against the idea of multiple voices, Žižek has defended that some people “are in a position to articulate all the truth of an entire situation” (Žižek and Daly 2004: 143) and even when that is not the case, as in most civil conflicts, there is still one side that is closer to the truth. For that reason, Žižek (2002) defends political intolerance versus ethical reconciliation. Contemporary archaeology situates practitioners in a complex position. Politics can be bypassed to a certain extent in contexts that are more removed from present concerns (the Mesolithic is rarely mobilised in hard politics), but they are unavoidable when one deals with issues that are perceived as contemporary, irrespective of their chronology. The choice of reconciliation, dialogue and consensus may not work and archaeologists will have to take sides, whether they like it or not, while at the same time trying to remain autonomous, as producers of objectified knowledge (González-Ruibal et al. 2015). It is not necessarily that reconciliation is not desired at least in practical, if not in political, terms (Mouffe 2013: 26). The idea is that reconciliation cannot be achieved at the expense of justice. Multivocality has often been used by heritage practitioners as a sort of shortcut to reach reconciliation without dispensing justice, but it rarely works (Schwartz 2012).

### *Multiculturalism*

Multiculturalism is often criticised in archaeology, but its ultimate logic is widely embraced. The strong concern with minorities (indigenous, African-Americans, immigrants, LGBTQ people, etc.) shown by the discipline exemplifies this. It is, however, not the focus on minorities but “the acceptance of the cultural wars (feminist, gay, antiracist, multiculturalist struggles) as the dominant terrain of emancipatory politics” (Žižek 2002: 565) that brings archaeology close to the ideology of multiculturalism and what Fraser (2017) has called “progressive neoliberalism”. Multiculturalism tends to emphasise horizontal differences and to disregard vertical antagonism (Žižek 2002: 565), which have been the traditional focus of emancipatory politics. It also tends to offer a view of the communities as empowered, critical and creative (Graeber 2004: 99), even when those communities have undergone violence or dispossession: the solution in that case is to rewrite the past in a positive light. Žižek (2005: 136) has criticised the New Age version of psychoanalysis according to which “after regressing to his primal traumatic scene and thus directly confronting it, the subject should, under the therapist’s guidance, ‘rewrite’ this scene, this ultimate fantasmatic framework of his subjectivity, in a more ‘positive’, benign, and productive narrative.” According to the philosopher, this is what minorities tend to do when they insist in producing narratives of the past in assertive ways.

I posit that this is also what many historical and contemporary archaeologists do when they try to empower their subjects and that this is a dangerous approach because, as Charles Orser (2011: 538) has warned, an excessive emphasis on how subalterns triumph over adversity runs the risk of providing unwitting “support for oppression and inequality today by neutralising it in the past”. The case of slums provides an excellent example of the traps of progressive multiculturalism. Historical archaeology has tended during the last couple of decades to cast a more positive light on working-class and ethnic neighbourhoods that are described in very negative terms in the literature of the period (e.g. Mayne and Murray 2001). Yet there is the risk to transform marginalised class and racial identities into just another

form of difference that must be celebrated. Many nineteenth-century slums were actually appalling places and archaeology bears witness to this (Sneddon 2006; Symonds 2011). Emphasising positive aspects is necessary to counteract stereotypes, particularly in those places that were not properly slums to start with, but were described as such for purely ideological reasons (Mullins 2006). Yet there is the risk of legitimising the dominant capitalist order by turning lower-class neighbourhoods into just picturesque places. As Frantz Fanon (2004 [1961]) argued for colonial slums, they are a technology for marginalisation, subjection and control: the lower classes are condemned to live in unhygienic slums, and then their living in slums is used to justify the inferiority of the marginal communities as filthy and primitive. A political archaeology is not the one that describes the ghetto as just another place for living, with its own materiality and rich social life; a political archaeology is the one that deconstructs the segregation device that is the slum in the first place and the ideology that underpins it. This is exactly what Dante Angelo (2017) shows through an abandoned house reused by squatters (undocumented immigrants and other marginalised people) in Arica, northern Chile. He studies the house as a negative space used to exclude people from social and political life and at the same time contradicts stereotyped and simplified notions of who those people were, through a sensitive examination of the material remains that they left behind. For Angelo (2017: 260), the work of the house as a tool of marginalisation started well before its recent use: the very architecture of the building, which reveals its Peruvian-ness (a subaltern, colonised identity), “embody the constitution of ‘the marginal’ historically and socioeconomically”.

Another case where liberal multicultural ideology can be seen at work is in the case of some archaeology of the homeless. Paul Graves-Brown’s enthusiastic “embracing of the margins” can be read as an unconscious call to accept inequalities as mere difference. He contraposes the negative attitude of estrangement of Buchli and Lucas (2001b) in their study of an abandoned council house, with the positive attitude shown by Kiddey and Schofield (2011) in their attempt to get closer to the experiential domain of the homeless. Those archaeologists, in fact, argue that “It is another world, with different rules and priorities” and with “different publics” (Kiddey and Schofield 2011: 5–6). Again, countering stereotypes on homelessness as proposed by Larry Zimmerman (2016) or Courtney Singleton (2017) and Rachael Kiddey (2017) is definitely a praiseworthy goal, but it runs the risk of falling into the multicultural trap, that transforms any collective into a culture with its own mores and values that must be respected and appreciated. This is particularly clear in Graves-Brown and Kiddey’s argument that the marginalisation of homeless people has much to do with the attitudes of sedentary populations towards mobile communities: “whilst today’s people are not intentionally nomads, their relationship with settled society resembles that played out between farmers, pastoralists and hunters for millennia” (Graves-Brown and Kiddey 2015: 141). They transmit the idea that homeless people live in “another world”, which is as complex and interesting as our own and that their marginalisation is largely due to their cultural otherness. This understates the work of capitalist ideology and political economy. Of course, there is nothing objectionable in trying to ameliorate the living conditions of the homeless community. Yet comparing the contemporary homeless with mobile groups in prehistory may help naturalise the existence of homelessness. This, in my opinion, is at odds with a truly political agenda: by casting marginality as cultural difference, we undermine politics by giving priority to policy. A radical approach (in the Marxist or feminist tradition) would address the structural conditions that make homelessness possible in the first place and would try to change such conditions. Of course, there are

many who “live outdoors” out of their own will (Zimmerman 2016; Symonds and Vařeka 2014), but the large majority of homeless people actually experience homelessness as an extremely harsh situation (often the result of previous traumatic experiences) marked by material deprivation and isolation (Goodman et al. 1991). While I find the archaeologies of homelessness powerful (and I will return to them in a more positive note later in the book), they can be politically ambiguous.

### *The end of universalism*

Multiculturalism is always associated with the celebration of the local: small, situated communities versus abstract universalism, which is linked to oppressive or reactionary politics (Eagleton 2006: 45–46). The emphasis on locality in archaeology makes a lot of sense: on the one hand, archaeologists work in specific localities most of the time and, on the other, these localities and their inhabitants have seldom received any attention by archaeologists. They were part of the picturesque landscape. There has been a move in recent years to recover the experiences and perspectives of those forgotten stakeholders (Hamilakis 2011). However, embracing the local should not be incompatible with a quest for universality. Indeed, it can be argued that the mandate of acting locally is one that is wilfully supported by neoliberalism: while we act locally and think globally (which often means that we use universalistic theoretical frameworks and apply them to local situations), it is capitalism that both acts and thinks globally. Local perspectives may lead to the atomisation of struggles: the myriad of grass-roots initiatives for the recovery of a democratic memory of the Spanish Civil War have produced fragmented narratives that have not been able to challenge the master narrative of the dictatorship, which had a national reach (González-Ruibal et al. 2015). It is also worrying to realise that whereas critical practitioners do activism and research in situated contexts (e.g. Shackel and Chambers 2004; Atalay et al. 2014), it is conservatives that control the production of grand historical narratives (for a recent example: Scheidel 2017), which have a real effect in legitimising the status quo before the public and even in defining policy: a notable example is that of classicist Victor D. Hanson, a staunch supporter of the Iraq War (González García and López Barja de Quiroga 2012). Rather than leaving the global to reactionaries, archaeology should support an alternative universalism, starting from specific experiences of violence, dispossession or empowerment. Thus, Žižek (2008: 670) argues that “the authentic moment of discovery, the breakthrough, occurs when a properly universal dimension explodes from within a particular context and becomes for-itself, directly experienced as such (as universal).”

Universalism and comparison have been strongly criticised for ethical reasons by Pollock and Bernbeck (2016), who consider the experience of human suffering, and particularly that of the victims of the Nazi genocide, as unique. While I agree that experiences of suffering are largely untranslatable, this does not mean that they are incommensurable, or that they cannot be compared. Actually, knowing and sharing experiences of suffering among victims of political violence is a way of creating networks of solidarity, which can effect political change: this has been the case with the victims of the Argentinian and Spanish dictatorships, for instance (Gatti 2016). It can also be defended that the archaeology of the contemporary past has to embrace emancipatory universalistic politics because the issues that it addresses are not isolated or exclusively local. In fact, many of the material phenomena of our era largely surpass any local context, because their materiality is expansive, because artefacts only work as part of global networks, or both: think of the US-Mexico border (McGuire 2013) or the remains

of the Cold War (Burström et al. 2009). Much of the phenomena that shape the materiality of our world (from nuclear radiation to acid rain) are hyperobjects (Morton 2013; Hudson 2014), which are characterised by “nonlocality” (see Chapter 8). This does not mean, as I have already mentioned (Chapter 1), that we have to forget the local or specific. But it is not enough to study how the global impacts the local or the local appropriates the global—as does the anthropology of globalisation (Inda and Rosaldo 2001). Only when local struggles are seen in their universality do they acquire their political dimension: as Žižek makes clear, universality explodes from within a particular context.

### *The celebration of choice*

The celebration of multiple voices and the local comes with another celebration: that of choice. The concern with choice is part of the wider debate on agency in anthropology and archaeology. Choice is seen as the political act par excellence, where one shows one’s agency, one’s ability to resist and to create a new world. As David Graeber has scathingly criticised, being with the “little guys” means that

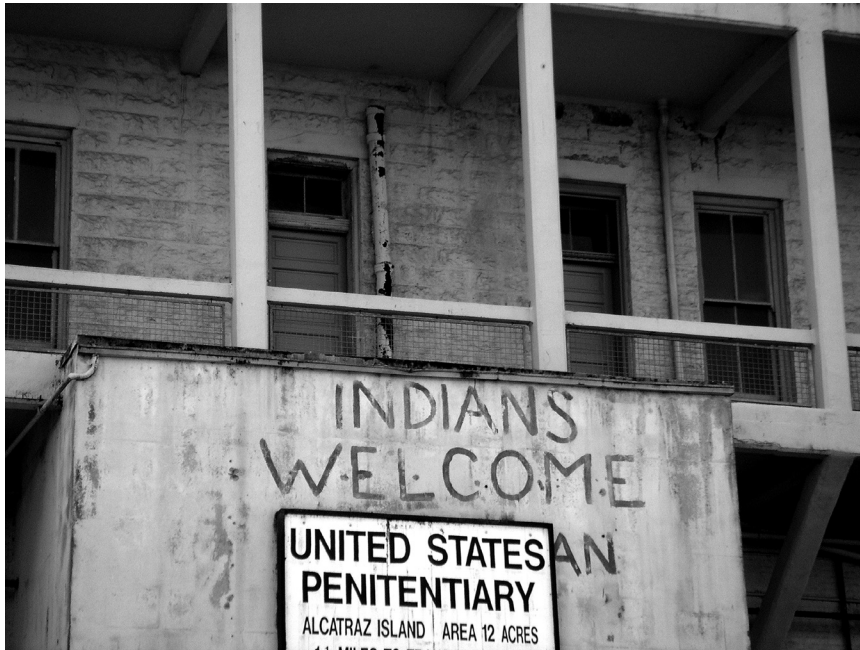
you must demonstrate that the people you are studying, the little guys, are successfully resisting some form of power or globalizing influence imposed on them from above . . . one demonstrates that they are not fooled, not crushed, not homogenized; indeed they are creatively appropriating or reinterpreting what is being thrown at them in ways that its authors would never have anticipated.

(Graeber 2004: 99)

Irrespective of whether the “little guys” are in a concentration camp, a slave plantation, or a supermarket, they remain political agents because they can choose. There are at least two problems with this perspective: on the one hand, it is debatable whether consumer choice can be considered political (except in consumer boycotts); on the other, it forgets that choosing always involves a predetermined reality: the options are given and one chooses from them. As Žižek (2002: 542) writes “We can go on making our small choices, ‘reinventing ourselves’, on condition that these choices do not disturb the social and ideological balance.” This resonates with the supposed practices of resistance identified by some archaeologists in relation to non-places; Graves-Brown (2007), for instance, points out ways in which the physical barriers that enclose malls can be “circumvented in practice”—which means that small choices can be made. The options for choosing, however, rarely destabilise the system. Real choice is a privilege of the powerful, as Wurst and McGuire (1999: 193) boldly assert.

Against the association of politics with choice, there is the notion of politics as a beginning, as *archē*. *Archē* in Greek means order, government, rule, but also beginning, origin. According to Hannah Arendt (1995: 88–89), politics for the Greeks were not so much the freedom to choose, but the freedom to establish a new beginning. Jacques Rancière (2001) has a more negative understanding of the word *archē*, which for him presupposes an asymmetrical relation between a specific superiority and an equally determinate inferiority. For him, politics occur when the logic of *archē* is ruptured, which is not only the interruption in the normal distribution of positions, but in the idea that there are dispositions related to those who have power and those who are subjected to it. Despite disagreements, the positions of Arendt and Rancière are similar in that they both identify with the political an event that breaks away the predetermined conditions of the real and their limited array of choices.

**FIGURE 3.1** Beyond choice: a new *archē*? Graffiti left by Native Americans in Alcatraz, San Francisco, during their occupation of the island in 1969–1971. Author's photograph.



The political act, from this perspective, is not to enter a shopping mall through the garden instead of through the asphalted paths, but the decision *not to enter it* and go elsewhere. Or to enter it while being black, no matter the route one takes (Nascimento et al. 2015). Thus, if archaeologists are interested in the political, instead of celebrating choice, they should try to locate those moments where a new beginning can be glimpsed. The graffiti of Alcatraz Prison (Figure 3.1), related to the Native American occupation of the island in 1969–1971, is a material memory of an *archē*, a new beginning that fostered a new wave of indigenous activism and new forms of struggle. And the same can be said of the Arab Spring of 2011. The street art of the risings (Naguib 2017) materialises a strong desire for a radically new beginning and an irrepressible urge to say “no” to all available choices.

### *Neomaterialist paradigms*

The new materialisms, Science and Technology Studies, Actor-Network Theory and similar paradigms have also contributed to the depoliticisation of archaeology, although the approach is definitely not at odds with a more political stance. I see three political problems with these perspectives: one is its tendency to celebrate things while forgetting their monstrosity; another the negation of dialectics through the blurring of dualisms, and the third is the naturalisation of existing systems, networks, or assemblages. The celebration of things is widespread among neomaterialists and post-humanist thinkers alike. Some post-humanists are avowedly technophilic (Braidotti 2013), whereas both post-humanists and



neomaterialists consider that we have to extend ethical relations to non-humans, not just trees, elephants, or the ozonosphere, but in some cases also to plastic debris and concrete (e.g. Domanska 2006b; Introna 2009; Pétursdóttir 2012). Although Webmoor and Witmore (2008: 61), following Latour, insist that we must never confuse the analytical levelling implied in a symmetrical approach “with notions of axiological or ethical equivalence” (also Witmore 2007a: 547; Bryant 2010), the truth is that things have been progressively elevated to the category of new subalterns, whom we have to extend notions of care and respect in their radical otherness (Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2016: 40; see critique in Fowles 2016). I will develop this point further in my discussion of materiality in Chapter 8, so I will not deal with it in any detail here. I would like to mention only that those people celebrating things should be careful to not forget the politics that are involved in their production and the moral and political inequalities that exist within things—see Hodder (2014) and Ion (forthcoming) for cogent critiques along this line. Pétursdóttir (2012) asks what do things deserve, but there might be things that do not deserve anything—smallpox, for one.

Regarding dialectics, these have fallen out of favour in the new materialist debates, for obvious reasons. Thus, Webmoor and Witmore (2008: 54) consider that the debate in archaeology is “stifled by dialectics (the impoverished logic of contradiction)”. Against dialectics, the contradiction/opposition between people and things, they advocate for mixtures that overcome modernist dualisms (object/subject, mind/body, culture/nature). This is all well, if we do not take the denial of dialectics too far. Dialectics (conflict, contradiction) is inherent to being. This is what both political philosophy and psychoanalysis teach us. Any attempt at denying contradictions implies higher levels of repression and increased internal conflict. To abandon the dichotomy between people and things should not lead us to forget that dialectical relationships (or at least relations of conflict and contradiction) still exist, because there are people and things that are more powerful or wealthy than others, or who want to impose their will on others, or impose it unwittingly, whereas contradictions often arise between our organic and non-organic elements (consider immune responses to implants) and between our psychic and material being (anorexia, bulimia).

Finally, the tendency to naturalise reality, which is the first work of ideology, can be detected in much of the work produced under the banner of Science and Technology Studies, as has been pointed out already (Saldanha 2003; Hornborg 2017). Even Wiebe Bijker (2003: 445), himself a prominent player in STS, was critical: “The STS agenda has been largely agnostic as to the normative and political issues related to the application of STS insights.” The problem is that STS, ANT and other materialist-inspired studies have tended to describe with aloofness and objectivity the work of systems and institutions—without judgement (Saldanha 2003). Agnosticism is praiseworthy in epistemological terms, but it is inadequate from a political perspective as there is no place for accounts of responsibility (Ion forthcoming). It might be good for policy, but it is bad for politics. In the case of archaeology, Olsen and Pétursdóttir (2016: 42) explicitly avoid the political debate surrounding marine debris (and its framing in terms of “garbage, visual disturbance and ecological threat”), because it has been cast in anthropocentric terms, and they prefer to focus instead on the things themselves, showing “concern for their voyages” and exploring how their “gathering and entanglement underpin alternative and less anthropocentric understandings of ‘care’” (also Pétursdóttir 2016, 2017). While this is a fascinating project that doubtless expands our archaeological imagination, its disinterest in the politico-economic causes of marine pollution and its consequences is worrying, but is shared by other work in the environmental humanities (see critique in Hornborg 2017). The abandonment of



the political is not necessarily inherent to the paradigm itself, however, as proved by recent theoretical and empirical work carried out by both Christopher Witmore (forthcoming a) and Bjornar Olsen (Olsen and Witmore 2014).

## ■ A radical politics for contemporary archaeology

In this section, I would like to outline some of the operations that can be performed by the archaeology of the contemporary past to take politics seriously. Some are well established, others are more possibilities rather than work actually carried out. I am not interested in the critique of the sociopolitics of archaeology (as an imperialist, capitalist, colonialist weapon) which have become exceedingly common during the last few decades. Instead, following a line developed by Marxist archaeologies (Leone et al. 1987; McGuire 2008), I would like to explore the potential of the discipline as a “mode of intervention” (Weizman 2014: 13). The operations that I will describe can be grouped under the following categories: dissensus, disclosure, defamiliarisation, desublimation and descent.

### *Dissensus*

The essence of all politics is disagreement or rather agreement in the fact that there is disagreement (Mouffe 2005, 2013; Rancière 2009a, 2009b). A political archaeology of the contemporary past, as any critical intervention, requires taking sides (Weizman 2014: 13). This means shifting our practices from achieving consensus—a typical task of public archaeology—to allowing dissension. Working with material things can be an advantage here. Bruno Latour (2005: 5) writes that “Each object gathers around itself a different assembly of relevant parties. Each object triggers new occasions to passionately differ and dispute. Each object may also offer new ways of achieving closure without having to agree on much else.” The *Thing*, Latour (2005: 13) reminds us, was originally the circle of stones around which Germanic peoples used to gather to discuss matters of collective importance: “Thus, long before designating an object thrown out of the political sphere and standing there objectively and independently, the Ding or Thing has for many centuries meant the issue that brings people together because it divides them.” According to Bruno Latour (2005: 21), there are many types of gatherings which are not political in the customary sense, but which bring a public together around things: churches, laboratories, marketplaces, museums. Archaeological interventions understood as a public theatre (Tilley 1989; Hall 2001; Moshenska and Schadla-Hall 2011), can also become a “parliament of things” (Latour 2005: 24). This theatre is not a place where one can ensconce oneself comfortably to watch the show, but is an arena where one is questioned, even provoked: a stage for dissensus (Rancière 2009b: 11). For bringing up dissensus, we need more archaeology and less heritage. Tilley (1989: 280) already defended archaeology and history as active interventions capable of creating various and often incompatible pasts, in opposition to a heritage industry that produces the past as a commodity. However, the triumph of heritage during the last couple of decades has displaced the radical potential of archaeology, which has tended to focus on scrutinising the political uses of the past, rather than creating opportunities of political disagreement through public interventions in archaeological sites. A good example of archaeology as dissensus is offered by McGuire and colleagues’ work at Ludlow, the site of a massacre of working-class people during the Colorado Coal Field War (1913–1914) (McGuire 2008: 188–221). By excavating the scene of a class

**FIGURE 3.2** Dissensus: the exhumation of a Spanish Civil War mass grave in Mount Estépar, Burgos. Photograph by Álvaro Minguito.



conflict, archaeologists are already making a political statement, taking sides and provoking those people who consider that class conflict is a problem of the past that has nothing to do with the present (McGuire and Reckner 2003: 91). An even stronger case of staging dissensus was the excavation of the Gestapo headquarters in the centre of Berlin in 1985 by a grass-roots collective (Koschar 2000: 226–227; Bernbeck and Pollock 2007). Here, the idea was openly one of provocation through theatricality: only by creating a shock could it be possible to challenge the consensual silence that was imposed onto this dark episode of the nation's history. The same theatricality is evident in the exhumation of Spanish Civil War mass graves (Figure 3.2), which become a stage where a countermemory is produced against a consensus that forsakes the victims of political repression (Renshaw 2011). The staging of dissensus is, in fact, a deeply aesthetic operation about which more will be said in the next chapter.

### *Disclosure*

Disclosure is perhaps the most common and obvious form of political operation in archaeology. Gordillo (2015) has talked of the “forensic appearance of truth”, to refer to the work conducted by the Forensic Architecture group led by Eyal Weizman, taking their cue from Alan Badiou: “Truth not only exists; it appears.” This is exactly what archaeology does: it makes truth appear. And it often proves Nietzsche right when he says that “there are no beautiful surfaces without a terrible depth.” Take the park of La Carcavilla in Palencia, Spain: a popular garden now, it was used during the Spanish Civil War to bury in unmarked graves over five hundred people executed by the Nationalists. Many human remains have been exhumed in recent years by archaeologists and anthropologists under the perplexed gaze of neighbours (García-Rubio 2017; García-Rubio and Ríos 2017). Another park, this time in Detroit,

concealed the traces of a late nineteenth-century multi-ethnic neighbourhood, whose inhabitants were evicted between 1910 and 1921, their houses razed to the ground and their memory sealed under turf and asphalt until archaeologists started excavations a few years ago (Ryzewski 2015). Sometimes it is natural elements that conceal depths: a recent archaeological study (Arnshav 2014) has explored the litter lying on the seabed in the natural harbours of the Stockholm archipelago and found thousands of artefacts (glass, cans, portable grills, fishing equipment, clothes) thrown by holiday-makers from their boats. They put into question the idea that the harbours are natural in the first place. It is precisely because the rubbish cannot be seen that it is so easily disposed of. Our age has littered the world with unexploded ordnance, corpses and waste, which have been concealed from view. Archaeology brings those terrible depths (either literal or metaphorical) back to the surface.

The operation of disclosure is even more the case in former colonised territories, where a double concealment has been performed: the original destruction and the contemporary marginalisation in global collective consciousness. Unlike the victims of political violence in Western contexts, those derived from imperial policies remain unknown to most, sometimes even the descendants of the colonised. In Tanzania, a colonial massacre committed by Germans before the First World War was documented in Mazinga Cave, also known as the “Cave of the Dead” (Schmidt 2017: 228–232). Evidence of the massacre was human bones of at least 14 men aged between 20 and 50, whose skulls had punctures and fractures made by high-calibre bullets. No German records of the massacre could be found. Oral memory was here the key: however, it was oral accounts collected in the 1960s that permitted to interpret the archaeological remains, because current generations have lost all memory of the crime. This means that, in the absence of archival material and with vanishing memories, archaeology will play an increasingly important role in disclosing colonial atrocities (see also González-Ruibal et al. 2011b; Rushohora 2015).

The act of disclosure is often carried out through excavation and exhumation. Although the trope of digging has come under criticism in recent years, due to its modernist connotations and its simplified vision of what archaeology does (Harrison 2011; Kobiałka 2013; Gnecco 2013), unearthing the truth is still a powerful political metaphor that suits archaeology well (Weizman 2014: 25). This is particularly so in cases such as concentration and extermination camps (Gilead et al. 2010; Theune 2010, 2016, 2017; Myers and Moshenska 2011), clandestine centres of detention (Zarankin and Salerno 2008) and mass graves (Haglund et al. 2001; Ferrándiz 2006, 2013; Steele 2008; Renshaw 2011). Yet we should not immediately equate excavation and revelation: increasingly other non-invasive methods are being used to reveal political violence, including GIS (Rosignoli 2015), satellite imagery (Myers 2010; Colls 2015), geophysics (Sturdy Colls 2015: 143–169), archaeology of architecture and space syntax analyses (Zarankin and Niro 2006; Fuenzalida 2017) and a combination of invasive and non-invasive techniques, such as soil probing, geochemical analyses and GIS (Fiedler et al. 2009). Some of the methods are also used by other forensic disciplines (Forensic Architecture 2014). Furthermore, a simple, but careful, visual examination can lead to the disclosure of truth. Thus, Schofield (2009: 159) notes that the realisation that the large majority of the civilian population would have died in a nuclear attack whereas a select few government officials would survive comes from a close scrutiny of the material record: “Only by visiting and examining bunkers from an archaeological perspective are these implications revealed.”

Neither should we equate disclosure with the revelation of a traumatic past. An equally powerful political operation is to excavate underneath terrible surfaces to discover beautiful depths. The supermodern age has shattered alternative worlds, often under pretence of

**FIGURE 3.3** Disclosure: excavations at a university parking lot in Indianapolis reveal an African American neighbourhood. Photographs by Paul Mullins.



progress and improvement. Archaeology can explore these vanished worlds sealed under asphalt or concrete, or simply erased: this is the case of District Six, the multi-ethnic neighbourhood in Cape Town that was razed to the ground by the racist policies of the South African



apartheid regime and whose material traces have since been reclaimed by former neighbours (Hall 2000: 156–176, 2001). Or the African American neighbourhood in Indianapolis that succumbed to equally racist policies of urban renewal, and whose traces archaeologists discovered under a parking lot (Mullins 2006). Mullins notes that the university parking that now covers the black neighbourhood is a product of anti-black racism, but is not seen as such. It can be argued that the excavation went a long way in changing perceptions of this apparently innocent space (Figure 3.3). If the guilt of power is often concealed, so is the resistance to it. In a remote villa in Bagh-e Neshat, in Iran, used by political dissidents during the time of Reza Shah (1925–1941), archaeologists were able to document material traces that can be interpreted as a change from peaceful toward violent political opposition (Papoli Yazdi et al. 2013; Dezhmakhoo and Massoudi 2014). Evidence for this is the fortification of the house, gun-related items found in a courtyard, and kilns and tools used for producing gunpowder. The secrecy under which political activities were carried out and the later assassination of many activists made such political activities fall into oblivion.

Disclosure is the main trope for a political archaeology of supermodernity because supermodern politics are characterised by their tendency to hide and distort (Weizman 2014). With its ability to see under the surface, to make truth “appear”, archaeology becomes the main discipline of resistance to power. It is the most forensic of all forensic disciplines, because it conducts its acts of disclosure in public, in the forum (Moshenska 2009b, 2013a), and in that way it becomes a theatre of memory (Hall 2001). Only its inability to present itself as such explains that architects (Forensic Architecture 2014) have occupied a place that in all fairness should correspond to archaeologists, who have always studied “an ever-changing set of relations between people and things, mediated by spaces and structures across multiple scales . . .” (Weizman 2014: 13). With politics in archaeology equated with self-deprecating auto-sociology, we have failed to see our powerful tools of revelation and their emancipatory potential in the present. Part of this emancipatory potential lies simply in redistributing the sensible: incorporating forgotten collectives into the realm of the visible and the worthy. As with dissensus, this is mostly an aesthetic operation about which more will be said in the next chapter.

### *Defamiliarisation*

Defamiliarisation has been considered an essential task of the archaeology of the contemporary past and historical archaeology more generally (Tarlow and West 1999; Buchli and Lucas 2001a; see critique in Graves-Brown 2011). By defamiliarising us with the present or the recent past, the discipline would work in a way quite unlike the way it usually does. It can be argued that prehistoric and early historical archaeology have traditionally performed an act of pedagogic familiarisation. As archaeology enunciates the material world, it loses its mysteriousness; the unknown becomes a repetition of the already known (Buchli and Lucas 2001a: 9): this polished stone is an axe. Things become banal tools through the process of naming and recognition. Post-processual archaeology engaged in a first defamiliarisation of the past by looking at the symbolic aspects behind functionality: this axe is an ancestor, a gift, an inalienable possession. Things are not what they seem at first glance. The work of the archaeology of the contemporary past neither fits the classic nor the post-processual model. Normally, it neither tries to read symbols nor to identify objects as tools. The work of defamiliarisation tends to operate in other ways: contemporary objects often look uncanny simply by examining them through the epistemic apparatus of archaeology (Buchli and

Lucas 2001a: 9). Thus, by applying the archaeological gaze to a shopping mall in the same way as one would a prehistoric landscape, the place becomes something else: the parking lot and landscaped areas suddenly appear as liminal, even wild, and the whole development an ephemeral phenomenon in many ways, despite its solid appearance (Graves-Brown 2007). The use of the archaeological (and more generally scientific) gaze to subvert the familiar is a method that has been widely used by artists (Vilches 2007), and so is the idea of decontextualisation and disarticulation (Bailey 2017).

Perceiving the world as familiar is the main work of ideology: the naturalisation of the real. Defamiliarising means exposing the ideological foundations of phenomena that are taken for granted. This is particularly important in the case of the material culture of dictatorship. Even when dictatorial regimes collapse, most of their materiality remains in use and continues having an effect in the present. Here it is useful to consider the distinction that Aleida Assmann (2011: 19) proposes between *Erinnerung* and *Gedächtnis*. *Gedächtnis* is linked to the verb *denken*, “to think”, and is linked to knowledge. *Erinnerung*, instead, literally means “internalisation”. *Erinnerung*, then, is not what is consciously learned, but what is absorbed: what becomes familiar. It can also be related to the concept of involuntary and habit memories (Olsen 2010: 117–124). The success of totalitarian technologies lies not as much in their active memory work as in their ability to become *Erinnerung* or involuntary memory. To understand the effectiveness of this social absorption, we should look at another phenomenon that is ingrained in collective behaviour through iteration rather than through rational incorporation: language. In his *Lingua Tertii Imperii*, Victor Klemperer (2001) offers a penetrating analysis of the devastating effects of radically transforming language—in this case German under the Third Reich. “Language,” writes Klemperer, “not only *creates and thinks for me*, it also guides my emotions and directs my psychic personality, more so the more I surrender to it naturally and unconsciously” (2001: 31; emphasis added). Discourses, leaflets, posters, or flags—no mechanism aimed at the conscious was as important in changing people’s minds as the alteration of language. Klemperer realised how decent people, even people opposed to Nazism, ended up adopting the Nazi perspective by assimilating its language, a language that is poor and simple and all the more effective because of that. Even years after the war, the linguist noted how some words still lingered in ordinary language, with all its consequences.

The same occurs with material culture (Olsen 2010: 117–124, 169). In fact, Klemperer (2001: 378) himself noted that architecture was part of the *Lingua Tertii Imperii*. In most dictatorships, monuments, urbanism and social housing became part of the familiar landscape of the nation. Part of the dictatorial nostalgia from Russia to Portugal can be explained by the persistence of a material world that has been assimilated as familiar and normal. Thus, much of the Romantic-modernist aesthetic notions that were espoused by Nazi Germany and that were materialised in parks, gardens, urban planning, memorials, motorways and car design made an easy transition into post-war Germany (Van der Laarse 2015). The work of defamiliarisation here is essential for ethical and political reasons; archaeology has to help see those whitewashed landscapes as what they actually are: “guilty landscapes” (Van der Laarse 2015: 369).

But defamiliarisation is not necessarily a hermeneutic act, a reinterpretation of the past. Defamiliarisation should also be a shock, a Heideggerian *Stoss* that makes history either start up or start again (Heidegger 2002). This is what happens when one finds or sees the personal belongings of the victims of the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis. Be they dug up by archaeologists or showcased in the museums of the Holocaust, those objects that had been radically



**FIGURE 3.4** Defamiliarisation: a girl's shoe from the Nazi concentration camp of Mauthausen. Photograph by Judith Benedix and Claudia Theune.



disarticulated become the most powerful indictment against Nazism (Figure 3.4). They are uncanny, *unheimlich*, because their home (*Heim*) has been shattered to pieces. They are orphan things that stare at us from the earth where we dig them up, or from the vitrines where they are exhibited. Or rather, exposed, because they are both uncovered and unprotected—without home and without family. It is often said that for archaeology artefacts are useless without a context, which is true, but an archaeology of the contemporary past that does not decontextualise, that does not do violence to things to reveal the violence that has been done to people, is equally useless. Or at least, morally wrong.

### *Desublimation*

As happens with Nazi landscapes, the familiar often looks sublime. The experience of the sublime has been changing during the last hundred years to develop into what has been called the “technological sublime”, which includes railroads, skyscrapers, dams and nuclear explosions (Nye 1994). We are saturated with it, directly or through media: “The flowing of cars along the highway, the airplanes flying over the airport strips, the lonely sailors sailing around the world under the gaze of television viewers”—writes Marc Augé (2008: 50–51)—“give us an image of the world as we would like the world to be. But this image vanishes if we look at it too closely.” When one looks at things closely, one sees all the ugly details, the flaws, cracks and creases. Looking closely is precisely what archaeology does. This operation can be considered defetishisation (Gordillo 2014: 253–255), or desublimation (González-Ruibal 2008: 260), which is a sort of reversed alchemy: sublimation, Nye reminds us (1994: 4), was

originally the work of the alchemist, who tried to act upon a substance to take it to a high state of perfection. Desublimation works in the opposite direction: it strives to bring back something that is presented as beautiful, perfect, or impressive to its banal or abject nature. If the aim of familiarisation is to make everyday things look strange, uncanny, or simply different to what we had previously assumed, desublimation seeks to deconstruct, even debase, whatever looks awe-inspiring. Thus, when Harrison and Schofield (2010: 256–257) look at “the peeling carpet, the layers of paint, and the traces of previous styles of airport furniture” in an airport, they are deconstructing the airport as a sublime ever-modern non-place of high technology and design.

Edmund Burke (1767 [1757]: 58) famously defined the sublime as “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror”. Terror, in turn, is associated with power: power is sublime because it can inflict pain and inspire fear and only when power is deprived of this ability, “you spoil it of everything sublime and it immediately becomes contemptible” (ibid.: 112). Yet the sublime is not only linked to terror and power, but also to pleasure and beauty: “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful” (ibid.: 60). Sublimation is an ideological operation that consists in concealing the negative side of a phenomenon—be it capitalism, real socialism, or industrialised warfare—and replacing it by lofty ideals and powerful aesthetics, which inspire both admiration and fear.

Archaeology can perform desublimation in different ways. A common procedure is to peel off the layers of meaning, values and allegories with which sublime objects are often enveloped. This is what Mark Leone (1984) famously did in his groundbreaking study of William Paca’s garden in Annapolis. The rationalisation and manipulation of landscape unconsciously masked the contradiction between the system of slavery in which Paca actively partook and his support of a Constitution defending individual rights and freedom.

Another desublimation strategy consists in showing the raw or abject side of a lofty idea. Thus, when McGuire and Reckner (2002) talk about the “unromantic West” and put the ugly side of class struggle and social exploitation in the picture, it is desublimation that is at work. What they are doing is opposing crude material facts (the remains of a razed miners’ camp) and the intangible imaginary of the West as a free land of opportunity. The same should be done in dictatorial and colonial contexts, whose materiality is aimed at idealising authoritarian regimes and whitewashing their crimes (Norindr 1996; Schlögel 2014; van der Laarse 2015). Thus, the elegant rationalist architecture of Asmara, Eritrea (Denison et al. 2007), a former Italian colony and now a World Heritage City, has to be juxtaposed to the violated bodies of the colonised as exposed by archaeological research (González-Ruibal et al. 2011b).

In relation to this, rubbish is a great desublimising device. It is a common dictum that archaeology works with garbage, and it is true that a large part of archaeological material is waste from other eras. However, the realisation of the character of archaeological things is often lost due to time distance, the materiality of ancient artefacts and patina (Dawdy 2016). This is less the case with contemporary archaeology. One has the very distinct feeling that one is working with pure rubbish (Rathje and Murphy 1992): during the excavations of the latrine and dump of the concentration camp of Castuera (1939–1940), in southern Spain, a terrible stench of human faeces came from the sondages, which made it impossible to forget the nature of the site and at the same time got us closer to the inmates (González-Ruibal 2016a: 277–278). The latrines of Castuera became a powerful reminder that the Franco

**FIGURE 3.5** Desublimation: the stench of dictatorship in the latrine of the concentration camp of Castuera, Spain, 1939–1940. Author’s photograph.



dictatorship was as much about prisoners dying from diarrhoea as it was about impressive neo-Renaissance architecture (Figure 3.5). Yet even when one does not work in such tragic scenarios, rubbish is a reminder of the ultimate nature of any commodity. Only in the rubbish bin or the landfill can we really see goods released from their labour, use, exchange and symbolic value. Their ephemerality, overabundance and futility then become obvious. Delinked from their context of advertisement and consumption, no longer objects of desire, it is easier to see the disconnection between the simulacra for which they stand and material things (Baudrillard 1968).

Another form of desublimation occurs at a conceptual level. Whether we call something rubbish or heritage makes a great difference. The archaeology of the contemporary past has gone to great lengths to transform waste into heritage. Heritage and contemporary archaeology have, in fact, become strongly associated and even when it is defended that processes of ruination, entropy and even destruction have to be accepted, the debate is still cast in terms of heritage, anti-heritage, or counterheritage (Kobiałka 2014; Byrne 2014; Pétursdóttir 2013; Holtorf 2015). My argument is that at times we would better do without the concept of heritage. This includes the anti and the counter, because in the same way that the opposite of love is not hate but indifference, the opposite of heritage is not anti-heritage but waste, which is a form of indifference. Any transformation of something into heritage implies a form of sublimation and I mean it here in the specific sense of Burke. His definition of the sublime works well for Cold War sites, which have been actually defined as a “fearsome heritage” (Schofield and Cocroft 2009), and indeed many sites of the recent past can be considered sublime. By conceptualising them as heritage, we sanction and further promote the sublime qualities of these places. Instead, by calling ruins rubble—as Gastón Gordillo (2014) does—we avoid the positive, romantic connotations of the former concept.

Thus, rather than trying to conceptually transform waste and rubble into heritage, the political stance would be to transform heritage into rubbish. Thus, one of the great struggles regarding the memory of the dictatorship in Spain has to do with the declassification as heritage of the colossal mausoleum where Francisco Franco is buried, the Valley of the Fallen: since its inauguration, the mausoleum became part of what is called “National Heritage”, which includes all royal sites in Spain (González-Ruibal 2009a). The term “heritage” has been used, here and in other contexts (Vilches 2011; Alonso González 2018), as a fetishising mechanism that prevents the past from being reworked, thus reinforcing the ideological role of monuments. Yet heritage as a concept can also be deployed in a satirical and ultimately desublimising way, as proved by the Italian artist collective *Alterazione Video* (Arboleda 2016, 2017). As we saw, by labelling “heritage” the ruined, unfinished buildings of Sicily, they actually unmask the fetishising power of the term.

Desublimation can also happen without the intervention of archaeologists, although they can have a role to play by documenting the process. It is the case with the social transformation or re-appropriation of structures of power for collective purposes, or the defacing and ironic recontextualisation of the works of dictatorship. Regarding the latter, the fate of many Soviet sculptures is a good example (Ackerman and Gobert 2017). Another is the ruination of historic *haciendas* in Ecuador: in this way, local communities prevent the “repackaging of the ‘colonial’ into a romantic aesthetic” that sanitises a darker past of land theft, debt peonage, and mistreatment of hacienda workers by *patrones*, as it happens in other places of the Caribbean and South America (Jamieson 2014). Others, however, have been transformed into community centres (daycare, meeting rooms, storage for crops). Ruins, however, are an ambiguous element in desublimation efforts. They might elicit reflections on the futility of certain modernist enterprises, but they can as easily be mobilised by imperialist or totalitarian nostalgia.

## *Descent*

Archaeology is “the discipline of the study of filiations”, writes Olivier (2008: 17). Tracing descent has been one of the oldest tasks of archaeology: the descent of some types of artefacts from earlier types of artefacts, of some hominins from others or of some cultures from previous ones. Descent, in the case of contemporary archaeology, follows a similar methodology and logic but has different political implications. It has been argued that one of the things that modernity does is to sever connections and create distances. Tracing descent in contemporary contexts, then, means retracing those connections and genealogies (geographical, technological, economic). In a way, this is similar to the critique of fetishism proposed by Marx (see Gordillo 2015: 386). In most cases, connections are already vaguely known, but forgotten: we dissociate commodities from their dark origins (Jameson 1991; Connerton 2009) and the production of violence from its effects (Bauman 1997: 127–128). This is the reason we feel so shocked when the context of commodity consumption and that of its conditions of production are forced to face each other through some disaster: consider the case of the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh (Weizman 2014: 17–18), whose collapse killed 1,127 people. Of course we knew that our clothes were being produced in sweatshops under conditions approaching slavery, but we failed to visualise the connection between our shirt and the slave, because the latter is half-concealed, vague and generally abstract. The same happens with violence, which now responds to a strict division of labour that

separates the one who kills and the one who is killed (Bauman 1997: 127–128). Zygmunt Bauman (1997: 243) argued that the *Kristallnacht*, the only officially organised massive pogrom of the Nazi regime, was a failure. The reason is simple: anti-Semitism had been disconnected from material violence in Western Europe, but the *Kristallnacht* reconnected them in a very tangible way: facing the streets full of broken glass and elderly neighbours mistreated by brutalised youth led to feelings of consternation, rather than support for the Nazi cause. The lesson was learned and subsequent political violence would be concealed and organised in a much colder and rational way. The work of archaeology should be precisely to show again the broken glass—so to speak.

Tracing descent may take several forms, but the boldest and simplest version could be a mere juxtaposition of the two extremes of a process: a commodity and its material conditions of production—but also a corpse and the factory that produced the weapons used in the killing. The logic here is geographical or even topological: to show how two points touch, even if they seem located far apart. This procedure has been regularly carried out by historical archaeology working on chattel slavery, for instance, although not necessarily in an explicit way (Ferguson 1992). Archaeology in plantations has often revealed in a powerful way the necropolitics (Mbembe 2003) that underscore the foundations of modern capitalism, by retracing the connection between sugar or cotton and the inhuman material conditions in which African slaves toiled. A more contemporary example is that of the use of forced labour by industrial companies under the Nazi regime. Many of these companies continued to thrive after the end of the Second World War, often concealing their past collaboration through a process of marketing and memory cleansing. A good case in point is Lufthansa. Archaeological excavations at Tempelhof Airport in Berlin have shown the terrible living conditions of the slave workers employed by the military branch of the company (Starzmann 2014, 2015; Pollock and Bernbeck 2015, 2016). Archaeology here does not only incorporate forced labour and Nazism in the genealogy of Lufthansa, but also connects Fordist capitalism and totalitarianism through the use of similar technologies for producing things and subjects (Starzmann 2015). In a different context, Vilches (2011) has shown a similar continuity between industrial capitalist technologies and technologies of repression in northern Chile. The old industrial buildings of the saltpetre boom provided an ideal space for controlling and disciplining political prisoners.

The same method can be employed in more recent contexts of capitalist consumerism. The links between consumption of beef and the destruction of Amazonia, for example, are systematically erased, and this erasure is essential for the continuation and expansion of the capitalist system, whose path of destruction is “swept away, hidden, or ignored” (Hoelle 2017: 759). There is a growing interest among anthropologists in capitalist processes of destruction (Gordillo 2014, 2017; Tsing 2015), but the terms of ruination and rubble are sometimes used in a vague, even metaphorical way (e.g. Stoler 2013), that make it difficult to grasp the real material consequences of capitalist devastation. These, instead, can be adequately addressed by archaeology: in 2006, I had the chance to study with my colleague Almudena Hernando the logging camps and cattle ranches established illegally inside an indigenous reservation in Maranhão State in north-east Brazil. We mapped the deforested areas and routes taken by the loggers, located ranches, documented logging camps and inventoried the many objects that were left behind after a police raid (González-Ruibal and Hernando 2010). The ugliness of the raped forest, the soiled rivers and the shabbiness of the camps contrast with the glamour of tropical hardwoods and the festive consumption of beef in Brazil and elsewhere (Figure 3.6).



**FIGURE 3.6** Descent: the origin of commodities in the devastated Amazon forest. An illegal logger camp in the process of being dismantled by the police, Awá reservation, Maranhão State, 2006. Author's photograph.



Tracing descent can also be done by reconstructing a *chaîne opératoire*, following the material steps that lead from raw material to end product—a victim of a bombing, a hamburger, a smartphone. Due to the mechanisms of distancing typical of modernity (such as bureaucracy and remote technologies), even when we do see victims, it is often difficult to regard them as the end of a technical process that started elsewhere and it is difficult to reconnect victim and executioner. In modern industrialised warfare, violence is so regulated and technical that it dissolves any sense of guilt (Neitzel and Welzer 2012). Yet industrial warfare leaves behind enormous amounts of waste that enable the reconstruction of the *chaînes opératoires* involved in mass killing. By reconstructing operational processes, we can visualise the connections between the specific outcomes of violence and the context of production of such violence, which is often concealed, abstracted and sanitised (Virilio 2005).

Another form of genealogical approach focuses on the temporal, rather than spatial vector. The purpose is to track down a situation of marginalisation or oppression in the present through the archaeological record. A paradigmatic example of this procedure is the work carried out in West Oakland by Praetzell et al. (2007). The neighbourhood has been a depressed area since the mid-twentieth century. Before that moment, however, West Oakland had a large working and middle-class multi-ethnic community, with a flourishing political and cultural life. Economic changes, insensitive housing developments, relocation and the construction of a massive double-decker freeway shattered the neighbourhood and contributed to the marginalisation of its inhabitants. Not surprisingly, this was the area that saw the emergence of the Black Panther movement. Excavations conducted in West Oakland after the 1989 earthquake revealed domestic contexts with a common “sense of style and sophistication”. Praetzell et al. (2007: 119) argue that the refined goods that were found (toilet sets, teawares, jewellery, fine foodstuffs) can be understood as a form of



resistance against racial stereotyping prevalent at the turn of the century: they were symbols of civility and personal dignity. This kind of genealogical research is particularly important because there is a tendency to naturalise present conditions and project them to the past, thus blaming people for their situation of dispossession. By depicting a past at variance with the present, uncomfortable questions may arise as to the political circumstances that have created the present (Mullins 2006).

Descent does not have to be limited to the contemporary era. In some cases, it is necessary to follow historical trajectories several centuries back. This is particularly the case in colonial contexts, where a situation of poverty or conflict is often blamed on supposedly changeless cultural attitudes of the former colonised people, when not genetic traits (see critique in Richard 2015a, 2015b; McEachern 2018). The concept of coloniality (Quijano 2000) is particularly useful here, as it dissolves the divide between the colonial and the postcolonial and insists in the connections between the forces that started operating in the fifteenth century and those of the present. The politics of predation and impoverishment unleashed by unequal global encounters during the last five centuries can be documented in some contexts through the material record (González-Ruibal 2015; González-Ruibal et al. 2016). Sometimes we can even go further back in time. Scott McEachern (2018) for example, seeks the origins of the terrorist group Boko Haram presently operating in the borderlands of Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad in historical developments that started around the late first millennium AD in the region. These have to do, among other things, with the emergence of warrior elites, predatory states, slavery, religious ideologies and tactics of resistance to all of them. An archaeology that seeks to understand the present deeply cannot be satisfied with a mere look at the last fifty or hundred years.

## Summary

Politics play a central role in the archaeology of the contemporary past. However, not all archaeology is equally political, even those practices that present themselves explicitly as such. Drawing upon neo-Marxist conceptualisations of the political which stress the relevance of disagreement and conflict, I suggest that much archaeology is closer to what has been called post-politics (Mouffe 2005), progressive neoliberalism (Fraser 2017), or even a kind of broad populism (Graeber 2004). In the first part of the chapter, I have examined some of the elements that characterise this approach, which, in my opinion, make it unhelpful to tackle the most pressing challenges of our times. Defining elements of the soft approach to politics include liberal pluralism (multivocality), multiculturalism, localism, the celebration of choice and apolitical neomaterialist perspectives.

Multivocality glosses over intractable conflicts and posits forms of democratic dialogue that forget extreme power inequalities. The ideology of multiculturalism, which is strongly associated with liberal pluralism, transforms any subaltern community into an exotic Other whose culture has to be appreciated (from homeless to slum-dwellers), notwithstanding the politico-economic circumstances that explain and condition their existence, an approach which is incompatible with a radical critique of capitalism. This is in turn strongly associated with the celebration of the local. The critique of universalism which came with the post-modern demise of grand narratives forgets that all emancipatory politics have had universal aspirations (from anarchism to feminism). In turn, the celebration of choice—best represented in the archaeology and anthropology of consumption—mistakes consumer decisions

for political freedom. I have argued that true freedom is better expressed in the possibility of a new beginning (*archē*) that breaks away from the limitations of available choices. Finally, new materialist perspectives have largely avoided hard politics through their refusal to deal with contradictions and accountability and by resorting to an epistemological agnosticism that has often ended up being ethical and political as well.

Against the prevailing neutralisation of politics, I propose to engage in a radical critique of the contemporary era through several operations, some of which are already being practised by archaeologists: dissensus, disclosure, defamiliarisation, desublimation and descent. Dissensus consists in emphasising disagreement, not for the sake of it, but for making visible conflicts that have been concealed: in that, public archaeology can become an ideal tool. Disclosure is a common trope in science, although it has been criticised recently. While the trope of unearthing the past might be a well-worn one, it still holds immense potential in the case of political violence, which is usually buried (literally and metaphorically). The same regimes that engage in violence and destruction and cover them up tend to deploy sublime materialities as a weapon of power. I understood the sublime in Burkeian terms, as something that excites fear and amazement in equal measure. Desublimation (or defetishisation) should be used in combination with disclosure to deconstruct oppressive regimes—be they totalitarianism or predatory capitalism. This consists in making manifest their nature through their abject remains or banal materiality, in order to deprive them of their majesty and terror—to make them “look contemptible” (Burke). Irony and satire can also be employed for this purpose, as seen in defaced statues and street art. Finally, descent is perhaps the quintessential task of a critical archaeology and, with disclosure, the one that fits more easily the archaeological imagination. Descent means tracing connections that are forgotten or whisked away by the ruling order: the link between a devastated landscape and a certain consumer good is the most obvious example. Descent is about tracing spatial connections, but also temporal ones. It means reconstructing genealogies, some of them counterintuitive, sometimes in the very long term. For this, archaeology has to abandon the usual academic compartmentalisations and work through prehistoric, historic and contemporary contexts.

# 4

## Ethics

ETHICS PLAY A pivotal role in archaeology today. This is also the case in the archaeology of the contemporary past. Ethics have been particularly relevant in forensic archaeology and anthropology, for obvious reasons: it is there where practitioners have been facing more serious dilemmas, often in cultural contexts far removed from Western values and practices and in complex political and institutional environments (Congram and Sterenberg 2009; Blau 2009; Joyce and Crossland 2015). Conflict archaeology more generally has been also confronted with thorny questions that include relations with relatives and victims, as in the case of forensic contexts, but also with military enthusiasts, metal detectorists and the media (Moshenska 2008; González-Ruibal and Moshenska 2015). More generally, the role of archaeologists in unveiling potentially disruptive memories in divided communities is an important matter of concern (González-Ruibal and Hall 2015). Ethical debates regarding indigenous peoples are also pertinent to the archaeology of the contemporary past for two reasons: some of the artefacts and places that have become sites of contention have to do with recent experiences of colonialism, and indigenous time blurs distinctions between distant and contemporary heritage.

In this chapter, I will not be offering an overview of the current debate on ethics, which would take us too far from the aims of this book. Instead, I will do four things: first, I will examine the consequences of the hegemony of ethics for the subdiscipline; I will then unpack the ethical implications of enquiring into the lives of others through archaeological methods—the unavoidable voyeurism. My third concern is with the relationship between temporality, ethics and the archaeology of the recent past: I will try and show that messianic ethics, international jurisdiction and contemporary archaeology inhabit a similar time. Finally, I will explore the relationship between affects, ethics and archaeology through two controversial concepts, resentment and nostalgia, that may expand the moral and political imagination of the discipline.

### ■ The hegemony of ethics

Ethics could be added to the list of depoliticising mechanisms of archaeology to which I referred in the previous chapter. The displacement of ethics by politics during the last couple of decades has been criticised by both archaeologists (Hamilakis and Duke 2007) and theorists (Mouffe 2013: 24–25). Hamilakis (2007: 20–21) complains that after the promise of post-processual archaeology in the 1980s, radicalism petered out and has been vanquished by the bureaucratisation and instrumentalisation of ethics and the hegemony of the politics of identity—but see Haber and Shepherd (2015), and Gnecco and Lippert (2015) for more radical appraisals. The prevalence of ethics is also clear in neomaterialist archaeology, where the debate is envisaged

in ethical, not political terms (Pétursdóttir 2012, 2013; Sørensen 2013). Interestingly, although the artificial divide between humans and nonhumans is abolished (Olsen 2010), it is somehow recovered when it comes to ethics: the thing then becomes the radical Other (Introna 2009) that we have to respect, care, embrace, etc. This does not make sense if things are us (Webmoor and Witmore 2008), except if we still work within an anthropocentric ethics. Thus, it seems to me that neomaterialism runs the risk of replacing the dialectical by the dialogical when it enters ethical terrain.

Ethics are of course not just a concern of thing theory, but are everywhere. They are particularly prominent in indigenous, public and postcolonial archaeologies and heritage studies. Normative ethics have tended to prevail and these are manifested, on the one hand, in a proliferation of deontological codes and, on the other, in a limitation of the moral imagination of archaeology, which runs the risk of being stifled by political correctness. The only paradigms where ethics have not yet totally prevailed are those archaeologies that are inherently political, such as Marxism and anarchism (McGuire 2008; Leone 2010; Angelbeck and Grier 2012; Borck and Sanger 2017). Decolonial theory, which is equally radical, has performed a strange move: it has adopted the banner of ethics, at least nominally (Haber and Shepherd 2015; Gnecco and Lippert 2015) without relinquishing the hard political questions—indeed, perhaps as a way of taking them further. As for the rest, it is interesting that whereas most archaeological debates in pressing contemporary issues could be expressed as well (or even better) in political terms, the tendency is to use the language of ethics. This is probably because ethics tends to focus on specific issues rather than wider problems, emphasises conflict resolution and tackling practical dilemmas that can be encountered in the field, reflects on relations with stakeholders, and proposes best practices and standards. All of this fits well with the managerial ethos of liberal post-politics and its attempt at minimising agonism (Mouffe 2005).

That ethics is comfortable with the post-political or at least outside the political was demonstrated in the discussions surrounding the relationship between archaeology, the military and the invasion of Iraq; those who framed the debate in ethical terms were often related to the American occupation of the country (which does not mean that they approved of it), or concerned with heritage without judging about the rationale of the war (Brodie and Renfrew 2005; Steele 2008; Stone 2011), whereas the critique against the invasion was made primarily in political terms (Hamilakis 2003, 2005; Starzmann 2008). Thus, even in fields such as modern conflict archaeology, where politics are potentially more prominent, the tendency has been to approach them within an ethical framework (Moshenska 2008; González-Ruibal and Moshenska 2015; Sturdy Colls 2015). It seems that dealing with ethics and procedural aspects is often a way of escaping more intractable political questions. Thus, in her work on Nazi extermination camps, Sturdy Colls (2012) consciously resorts to non-invasive methods for ethical reasons: excavating those sites, particularly when human remains can be disturbed, is banned by rabbis who adhere to a strict interpretation of the Halacha law. A political perspective would ask, in the first place, what is the agenda of conservative rabbis and whether their voice can stand for all the Jews of the past, many of whom were secular, outright atheists or adhered to more flexible branches of Judaism. This may not change our activities as archaeologists (we may still not exhumate bodies), but the ethical decision would be at least taken in awareness of the political context.

In any case, it is not my intention to deny the value of ethical discussion. Not all ethics are anti-political, normative and narrow, and in fact some of the references mentioned above engage with important topics in profound ways. Ethics can be an open exploration of the morally

uncertain and the deeply troubling, of our relationship to others, human and non-human, beyond rules and codes. The ethical, however, has often been privileged at the expense of a wider political discussion. While this may work in certain contexts, it definitely does not in many of the situations that archaeologists must face when studying the contemporary past.

## ■ The ethics of witnessing

In Chapter 1, I argued that contemporary archaeology can produce knowledge not just about the unknown, but also about what is already known. This latter form of knowledge implies important ethical questions. We know that we know and yet we keep asking questions. This brings to mind Bodenheimer's research on the obscenity of questioning (cited in Žižek 1989: 179): "The question lays open, exposes, denudes its addressee, it invades its sphere of intimacy." Nowhere is this clearer than in examining the debris of the contemporary past. The shock of anagnorisis to which I referred in Chapter 1 comes from recognition (we see and identify those things that could be our things, or those of our parents or grandparents), but also from the realisation of our totalitarian gaze. As any totalitarian power we do not have all the answers, but we do pose all the questions (Žižek 1989: 179) and our aim is to reach the innermost, intimate kernel of the other (Žižek 1989: 180). Even if this is not our avowed goal, is it not what garbology in fact does? Bill Rathje (2001) exposes the intimacy of people, even those aspects that they keep for themselves in interviews, and they would be ashamed if they were confronted with them—as one would be with his or her own faeces.

Most archaeology of the contemporary past works in this way. Our questions are inevitably obscene (Buchli and Lucas 2001a: 123–125), because they aim at the intimate and because they force the addressee to answer—the occupants of the abandoned council flat studied by Buchli and Lucas (2001b) cannot say "no". Like the inquisitor or the colonial ethnographer (Rosaldo 1986), the archaeologist goes deep into the other's life (Figure 4.1). We know or can imagine how life was in the trenches of the Great War, how bare life was in the Nazi *Lager*, yet we keep asking questions and keep facing the shock of anagnorisis. We know things that not even they, the protagonists of History, know or knew. We know things that they would prefer that we did not. Žižek (1989: 180), following Bodenheimer, claims that the repeated questioning of the child does not really aim at achieving new knowledge but, rather, at exposing the father's ignorance: "A question . . . always makes the subject formally responsible for it." Are we asking responsibility, for the past and for the present, to ruins and their spectres? Maybe. But perhaps Horkheimer and Adorno (2002: 214) are closer to the truth, when they say that "the child's endless questions are already a sign of a secret pain, a serious question to which it has found no answer and which it cannot frame in its proper form." Archaeologists, like children, keep asking questions because they do not know how to ask what they ultimately want to know. Or maybe our secret pain lies in knowing that we know already.

The flipside to obscenity is commitment. The intimate knowledge produced by contemporary archaeology produces a relationship of responsibility. Seeing what we should not be seeing makes us witnesses of a kind, with all its ethical implications (Blocker 2009). Agamben (1993: 94) reminds us that the word indicating the act of knowledge (*eidenai*) and the word for history (*historia*) both derive from the root *id-*, which means "to see". The historian is originally the eyewitness. This made sense in the ancient world where historians, from Herodotus to Polybius, had often first-hand experience of the facts they narrated (as opposed to the antiquarians or those engaged in *archaiologia* who did not). Modern historians have rarely seen



**FIGURE 4.1** The obscenity of questioning: abandoned personal objects in a peasant house in Galicia, Spain. Author's photograph.



those events that they investigate. But it is much more difficult to be an archaeologist without being a witness.

The archaeology of the contemporary past, more than any other archaeology, links knowledge and ethics. From the moment one starts working with the contemporary, one accepts the responsibility that comes associated with that knowledge, with having the privilege and burden of seeing. Yet, what kind of witnessing is that where coevalness is denied? It has been proposed that memory cannot be restricted to first-hand experiences and the recollection of events. Marianne Hirsch (2008) has coined the term “postmemory” to refer to the relationship



of the second generation with a traumatic past. In the same vein, we could speak of postwitnessing. As archaeologists, we do not document the events as they happen, but we become a witness of a kind when we dig them up. Paradoxically (or not), we are at the same time postwitnesses and hyperwitnesses. We see too late, but we see more. Seeing too much is not less problematic than seeing too late. Postwitnessing implies ethical and epistemological problems. From an ethical point of view, it implies an added distance to that which is already inherent to witnessing (Blocker 2009: 37); from an epistemological point of view, there is the often insolvable issue of equifinality: we witness a disaster whose causes we cannot always ascertain with certitude.

The work of witnessing and the epistemological method of contemporary archaeology make the discipline akin to some artistic undertakings which deal with the careful documentation of minutiae. Aleida Assmann (2011: 376–388) considers the work of Russian artist Ilya Kabakov and Yugoslav writer Danilo Kiš. Kabakov collected rubbish for his installations in 1970s and 1980s Moscow. He organised the waste in a manner of an archive or, we might better say, a museum, since archives host documents and museums store artefacts. The objects that he kept were of the kind usually thrown away: from piles of paper (bills, bus tickets, newspapers) to grains of dust. He is concerned with waste that bears the traces of personal use and contact. Waste for him is a form of resistance against death and a utopian promise, a countermemory from which something new can emerge: “as long as there still exists somewhere a memory of a life, everything can be recalled to life. This memory ‘remembers’ everything which has lived” (Ilya Kabakov, cited in Assmann 2011: 383). Danilo Kiš’s *Encyclopaedia of the Dead* describes a similar undertaking. The writer imagines an encyclopaedia that is a total archive which contains all that is “‘merely there’ and uncodable”, everything that has been excluded from cultural storage for being deemed insignificant (Assmann 2011: 385). The librarians in charge of the encyclopaedia document in full the life of those who are quickly forgotten. They work with the assumption that “nothing is insignificant in a human life, no hierarchy of events.” To those who mourn their dead, the encyclopaedia gives proof that their life has not been in vain, that there are still people on earth “who recorded and accounted value to every life, every affliction, every human existence” (Assmann 2011: 387). Like Kabakov and Kiš’s librarians, archaeologists are ready to document every single piece of waste of every human life on earth. Our knowledge should be a form of inexhaustible care that discriminates against no one and embraces all and everybody. Perhaps no one has done so in a more poignant way than Iranian archaeologists Leila Papoli and Mariam Dezhamkhooy. They have documented with care and sensibility the lives of anonymous individuals who were victims of the 2003 earthquake that destroyed the historic town of Bam (Figure 4.2). They reconstruct the last hours of the neighbours through the artefacts found in their devastated homes. They make us empathise with those women, men and children, who could be any of us:

At midnight on 25 December 2003, Mrs Ghanbari was praying in her white scarf. After praying she did not take off her scarf—she left it for tomorrow morning’s prayer. Mrs Ghanbari put her little son’s bed next to hers. The little boy took his toy to his bed. The other beds were placed next to each other. Mrs Ghanbari filled the kettle with water and put it on the stove to keep the air humid.

(Dezhamkhooy and Papoli Yazdi 2010: 348)

Dezhamkhooy and Papoli extended their ethical responsibility beyond the usual commitment of archaeologists to what is called “heritage”. They could have limited themselves to recording the damage to the historic buildings of Bam. But they thought that bearing witness

**FIGURE 4.2** The ethics of witnessing: the ruins of the Meskani family house in Bam, Iran. Photograph by Leila Papoli.



to the interrupted lives of its citizens was not less important. This breaking with temporal boundaries brings us to the next point.

## ■ The temporality of ethics

The contemporary era has a rather unique temporality (see Chapter 6) which poses new ethical challenges to archaeologists (González-Ruibal 2016c: 164–169). It is an era in which masses of people have been (and are) expelled from history, either by having any memory of them erased, or by outright annihilation. By committing ourselves to bring the victims back to the time of History—simply by reasserting their truncated existences, their pasts, the futures of which they had been deprived—we can go some way in rectifying an injustice (e.g. Haglund et al. 2001; Steele 2008; Renshaw 2011). In that, archaeology aligns itself with Walter Benjamin’s idea of Messianic time, which expands the compromise of living generations to the victims of the past (Benjamin 1968). This is an idea that was reiterated in a powerful way by Jacques Derrida (2006, see also Innerarity 2001; Mate 2003). The philosopher argues that no justice seems possible

without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism.

(Derrida 2006: 121; original emphasis)

This could be properly called “archaeological ethics”—a truly archaeological one that breaks the narrow temporal limit of conventional ethics.

In fact, by breaking with historicist time, archaeology aligns itself also with the current “time of jurisdiction” (Bevernage 2008) in the case of crimes against humanity—a juridical innovation of the mid-twentieth century. By asserting that crimes against humanity are not subject to any statute of limitations, international law claims that they are never really past, never distant enough (Mate 2003), in the same way that archaeology denies the past its radical absence by reminding that it is still present through its vestiges (Shanks 1992; Olivier 2008; Olsen 2010). The convention on the non-applicability of statutory limitations to war crimes and crimes against humanity “has an all-embracing temporal sweep in that it applies to all war crimes and crimes against humanity, past, present, and future” (Miller 1971: 481). In this sense, both archaeology and jurisdiction work in a regime of spectrality, that is, one in which the haunting presence of the past disturbs the present. This regime invalidates historicist notions of time by problematising simple dichotomies between present and past, presence and absence (Domanska 2006a; Bevernage 2008). Both jurisdiction and archaeology coincide in that the past is not absent—in the case of traumatic episodes, it can only be non-absent (Domanska 2006a). As such, both jurisdiction and archaeology dissolve conventional temporalities. In the case of jurisdiction, a temporal limit for the prosecution of crimes has been broken with the notion of crimes against humanity. In the case of archaeology, historicist time is dissolved first, through the realisation that the past is here in the present, and, second, through the abolition of the time limit of archaeology. This was done not by removing the boundary that is most temporally distant (as in jurisdiction), but, on the contrary, by dissolving the most recent: the present, too, is the business of archaeology (Buchli and Lucas 2001a; Harrison 2011; Olivier 2013).

Bevernage (2008) argues that the time of history and the time of jurisdiction are approaching each other, as they come to terms with a temporal regime of spectrality. However, whereas history effects a theoretical and ethical change, the transformation of juridical and archaeological time is also a transformation of practice. Tribunals can deliver justice for genocides that are hundreds of years old; archaeologists can uncover the dead who have been hidden in mass graves. Both fields co-produce the regime of spectrality beyond mere discourse, since they both invoke the dead in practice. Archaeologists recover the ghostly presence of the victims through their bodily remains and their objects, and the ghostly presence of the dead is likewise summoned by the law. As part of a lawsuit against the Franco dictatorship in Spain, for example, the dictator and 35 high officers of the regime were called to testify . . . even if they all had been dead for decades (García Yeregui 2010). In this case, however, it was the judge (Batalsar Garzón) who was eventually prosecuted and expelled from the judiciary. The political motivations were clear. The judicial system is largely conservative in Spain and against meddling with a difficult past, but the justification for expelling the rebellious judge is interesting, since Spanish criminal procedure law only allows investigations when there is a physical person that can be accused of the crimes. It was argued that when there is no one alive to prosecute, it is the time of historians, not of justice (Barrero 2012: 391). This means that the Spanish judiciary is out of the regime of spectrality that I have been describing and, in consequence, out of the realm of timeless responsibility.

Irrespective of the generalisation of the values of universal jurisdiction and the progressive acceptance of non-linear time in archaeology, the idea that our political and ethical commitment fades away when a particular past becomes more distant is still widespread. The conception is that, as time passes, history is blurred by the progressive decline of

documentation. Perhaps the best example of this temporal perception emerges again from the dead. The body of an American soldier fallen in the Vietnam War receives a treatment after exhumation that has nothing to do with the remains of a Roman soldier excavated in a first century AD battlefield. No one would put the remains of the American soldier in a museum. But things are not always so clear-cut, and time is seldom a simple vector (Nilsson Stutz 2016).

To start with, it is not necessarily true that time cools down grievances and political emotions, as we will see in the next section. Eviatar Zerubavel (2003: 38) mentions several cases that prove the idea wrong, such as the persistent Irish hatred for Cromwell (d. 1658), or the rejection of monuments to conquistadors by Native Americans. To the list we can add the dismantling of statues and monuments dedicated to Confederate personalities in New Orleans, which shows that the wounds opened by slavery and racial segregation are far from closed.<sup>1</sup> The refusal of the past to vanish from our lives is not arbitrary. As long as people consider that an unjust situation is reproduced in the present (as with the continuous marginalisation of indigenous and Afro-descendant populations in America), the past will never be regarded as done and over, but always as contemporary. It does not matter if the events happened thirty years or three millennia ago. From this point of view, it does not make much sense to speak of prehistoric, historical, or contemporary archaeology, as an artefact or site from any period can break into the present (and interrupt it) at any time (Schmidt and Mrozowski 2013). This is particularly the case with ethnic, national, religious and ancestral temporalities, which do not apply by the rules of historicist conceptions of time. As Bernbeck and Pollock (1996: 140) remind us, since myth stresses the continuity of past and present, the past is considered always to be “just yesterday”. The same occurs with concepts of time that are not strictly mythical, but emotionally charged nonetheless. Thus, the ruins of El Born in Barcelona have been the ground for important controversies. Excavations of this site brought to light the remains of the town destroyed by the Spanish army during the War of Succession (1701–1714), widely regarded as a war of conquest by Catalonians. For many Catalanian nationalists, the remains of El Born are not a distant past, but something that touches (or collides with) the present. They belong to a topological space, where unilinear time does not work (Witmore 2007b). A similar thing happens with religious time, as demonstrated by the infamous case of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, destroyed by Hindu fundamentalists to recover the alleged ruins of a temple to Rama buried under its foundations (Bernbeck and Pollock 1996). Not all religious time adopts, of course, the face of fundamentalism (see Byrne 2014). Finally, ancestral time also interrupts the temporality of supermodernity and poses important ethical and political challenges, as has been abundantly experienced in North and South America (Watkins 2001; Schmidt and Mrozowski 2013). As Verdesio (2013; also Atalay et al. 2014) has argued, the ancestral time of indigeneity should be used not just as a niche time relevant only to specific communities, but instead to rethink archaeological temporalities, which are inherently modern (Thomas 2004) and thus constituted by specific notions of change, evolution, directionality and linearity (Hernando 2002; Olivier 2008).

It would be misleading to consider that only what we could call “emotional” times (ancestral, religious, affective, or ethnic-national) disturb the Cartesian temporality of modernity and create ethical challenges to archaeologists. Secular, political time can also become Messianic, and this is actually the time in which Walter Benjamin (1968) was thinking when he wrote his theses on the philosophy of history. That the time of moral and political responsibility is expanding is made clear by the claims of indigenous groups or

descendants of slaves (Mate 2003: 106; López-Mazz 2015b), which cast their requests in the language of the law, not (or not only) of history, because their requests are of a juridical nature, and not just symbolic. It is not enough for archaeologists to acknowledge the symbolic right to narrate for the indigenous peoples or slave descendants. It is necessary to accept their right to insert their claims in a framework of secular justice. Now this is something that is more easily done if we deconstruct historicism and approach historical/archaeological time to the unbounded time of jurisdiction, or if we break historical boundaries and accept that the time of colonialism or slavery is also the time of supermodernity and that current grievances—that nobody doubts can be expressed in the language of law—are part of a continuum of oppression that cannot be compartmentalised as belonging to another time (Mate 2003: 108; López-Mazz 2015b). Ghosts, writes Daniel Innerarity (2001: 64–65), are what “prevents the present to be closed within itself”. The time of archaeology, then, has to make room for ghosts.

## ■ Ethics and affect

That politics, ethics and emotions (a form of affect) are strongly related is well known. Hobsbawm (1994b: 105–106) traces the origin of the politics of emotion to the generalisation of representative democracy at the end of the nineteenth century, which is when “governments, intellectuals and businessmen discovered the political importance of irrationality.” The links between affect, ethics and politics has recently been the object of much research, which has insisted in the importance of the body in the production of politicised subjects. The relationship has been both criticised (Ahmed 2004), or defended for its emancipatory potential (Hardt and Negri 2004; Beasley-Murray 2010; Mouffe 2013). As a discipline that works with non-discursive matter, archaeology does not just expose emotional behaviour in the past (Harris and Sørensen 2010; Tarlow 2012), it is also enmeshed in an economy of affect, of which it can participate more or less actively. The vestiges of the past can awake religious feelings or senses of national identity, at times with tragic political implications, as we saw in the previous section (Bernbeck and Pollock 1996). Rather than opposing mere scientific rationality to affect, archaeologists should try to work with emotion critically, unfleshing its ethical and political dangers, but also its potentials. The exhumations of victims of political killings and the memory practices that take place around them provide an occasion for an “emotional catharsis” (Renshaw 2011: 176). As we saw in Chapter 3, they are a powerful performance that effectively counteracts the emotional economy of fascism—better than any discourse. We have to see the place of the exhumation as an “affective field” (Harris and Sørensen 2010: 150) that profoundly destabilises the affective fields of dictatorship.

In this final section, I would like to examine two specific emotions for their political and ethical potential. In that, I would like to follow the lead of Mark Leone (2009), who has suggested that personal emotions can be mobilised to productively inform our work as archaeologists. However, instead of exploring positive feelings, such as compassion or love, which have already been the object of much ethical and political discussion, I would like to explore two forms of negative affect: resentment and nostalgia. Both enjoy a bad reputation—resentment, undoubtedly, even more than nostalgia. They both have to do with memory and can be seen as the mirror image of the other. If resentment refers to a memory of violence and injustice, nostalgia is a longing for a vanished past. They also have in common a peculiar



temporality: they are the product of a non-absent past or rather they refuse making the past absent. They insist in its haunting presence. Instead of offering more reasons to reject them, I would like to do the opposite: I would like to reclaim them as valid ethical and political concepts that are strongly related to the work of archaeology. It could be argued that concepts with less dark connotations could be used—memory, for instance. My choice of resentment and nostalgia is conscious. I choose them because they entail suffering. With Sara Ahmed, I believe that suffering is

a form of activity, a way of doing something. To suffer can mean to feel your disagreement with what has been judged as good. Given this, suffering is a receptivity that can heighten the capacity to act. To move from happiness to suffering . . . can even spring you to action.

(Ahmed 2010: 210)

Resentment and nostalgia are about a form of suffering that is physical: pain. So is archaeological fieldwork always physical and often painful—for what it discovers and for the way it discovers it.

### *Resentment*

Resentment is behind some of the most violent and aggressive political systems of the contemporary era and is closely associated to racism, xenophobia and ultra-nationalism. Fascism epitomises perfectly the politics of resentment and its refusal to forget past grievances, real or imaginary. This is why fascist crusades seem so anachronistic: the extermination of the Jews, the remaking of the Roman Empire or of the Spanish Empire. Yet even when resentment does not acquire such sinister airs it is frowned upon as immature and unreflective at best. Thus, Blacker (2013: 175) compares unfavourably the project of Omer Bartov to that of Marianne Hirsch in their quest for their Jewish roots, because the former is unable to conceal his resentment at the situation of abandonment, when not outright desecration, of Jewish memory in Ukraine. Blacker notes that the frustrated traveller fails to take an ironic look at the situation, to assume that every return implies a work of fantasy, an impossible travel to an original land that never was. Similarly, and on the other side of the frontline, the ethnic German Bartl is criticised by Yuliya Komska (2011) for his unrestrained fury at the situation of the Sudetenland taken over by the Czechs. More generally, the issue of resentment tends to emerge whenever a victim refuses to accept the status quo of the past. Thus the question posed by a journalist to a man who organised the exhumation and reburial of 377 people killed by the Franco regime in Murcia: “Don’t you think that at this stage [forty years after the end of the war], this thing of the monolith may sound like rancour, like unearthing more than the remains of the dead?” (Serrano Moreno 2016: 67).

What do they expect? When your family is exterminated and their memories turned into ashes or sealed in an unmarked grave, should we expect irony and aloofness? When you are expelled from the land you consider your own, the land of your ancestors and the ancestors of your ancestors, are you supposed to take it gently? These views reflect a very postmodern appreciation of both history and politics, which is well represented in the work of Richard Rorty. The ironist is the new cultural hero, one that sees the past as a mere narrative that can be written over and over again: “There are only little mortal things to be rearranged by being described” and there is nothing like “the right description” (Rorty 1989: 99). Bartov and Bartl,

on different sides of the political spectrum, look both provincial and atavistic in their quest for essence, in their failed attempts to produce the right description of a past that keeps rearranging itself. I do not mean that their quest is not politically problematic, but so is the dismissal of their resentment. Rorty's irony and contingency seem out of place for those who have lost families, homelands, even the past.

I came to appreciate resentment as a political category for two reasons. First, in my own practice as an archaeologist of the Spanish Civil War, I have been called a *resentido* ("resentful") more times than I can remember for recovering the memory of the Republicans. That is truly ironic in my case, since all my family from both sides were with the Nationalists, some were killed by revolutionaries, and all thrived with the dictatorship. However, there is the idea in Spain that all of us who work on the Civil War do it not out of a desire for social justice, a more democratic nation, or scientific purposes: it is all out of resentment. After hearing many stories of suffering by true victims or relatives of victims of the war and the dictatorship, I came to realise that resentment was not necessarily negative, but a powerful political force. While most of the people I knew expressed their resentment, not a single one of them was vindictive. This is a common mistake: to equate resentment and vindictiveness. Resentment can find a variety of outlets: a craving for vengeance is one, but is rare among survivors of crimes against humanity. A desire for truth and justice is far more common. Yet both are predicated on the existence of an objective truth, which seems so repugnant to ironists. It is important here to distinguish, as Didier Fassin (2013) proposes, between resentment and *ressentiment*. The latter results from a historical alienation, often a life-long exposition to injustice: something did happen that left a moral injury and its victims seek recognition, not vengeance. Resentment is a form of ideological alienation, instead, where reality is blurred: as such, it tends towards vindictiveness and animosity. From this point of view, the blacks that suffered under apartheid can be said to experience *ressentiment*. French policemen's grievances against magistrates, minorities and the public more generally can be considered resentment.

Fassin takes the notion of *ressentiment* from Jean Améry (1980), who is the second reason for my appreciation of resentment. I find Améry's work illuminating for two different motives: on the one hand, for his refusal to accept the moral equalising implicit in ideas of dialogue, forgiveness and reconciliation and his insistence that he, as a victim, has the key to moral truth; on the other hand, for his rejection of historicist temporality. Regarding the first issue, I have already mentioned that the post-political paradigm that is prevalent in much archaeology and heritage studies (Chapter 3) tends to neutralise dissensus through multivocality. Améry is yet another ally in the battle against post-politics and in the vindication of a deep objectivity: "Only I possessed, and still possess, the moral truth of the blows that even today roar in my skull" (Améry 1980: 70). To accept forgiveness is as much as accepting with resignation that things were the way they were. He is adamant, therefore, that reconciliation has only one loser: the victim. Either because of a moral equalising of the victim and the executioner, or because the victim who fails to forgive is seen as morally inferior to the one that is guilty (individually or collectively).

However, what is perhaps more interesting in Améry's work, from an archaeological point of view, is his take on temporality. His is a strong critique of historicism based on purely moral reasons: "I rebel: against my past, against history, and against a present that places the incomprehensible in the cold storage of history and thus falsifies it in a revolting way" (Améry 1980: xi). Against "the cold storage of history", resentment produces a twisted temporality:

it nails every one of us onto the cross of his ruined past. Absurdly, it demands that the irreversible be turned around, that the event be undone. Ressentiment blocks the exit to the genuine human dimension, the future. I know that the time-sense [*Zeitgefühl*] of the person trapped in ressentiment is twisted around [*verdreht*], dis-ordered [*verrückt*], if you wish, for it desires two impossible things: regression into the past and nullification of what happened.

(Améry 1980: 70)

Note that *verrückt* means two things: as a verb, it translates as “disarrange” (*verrücken*) and as an adjective means “mad”. Améry accepts that temporality for him has gone crazy. He cannot accept that time heals wounds: whoever forgives, “subjugates himself to the social and biological time-sense, which is also the ‘natural’ one” (Améry 1980: 72). He rebels against this “natural” time, which is actually historicist time, a temporality oriented forwards, erasing the past and celebrating the future (“what tomorrow will be has more value than what was yesterday”). The moral man, according to him, demands “the suspension of time”, it makes the “absurd” demand that time turns back, that its irreversibility is abolished. He agrees with Hans Magnus Enzensberger in that Auschwitz is not the past, but the past, the present and the future of Germany (Améry 1980: 78).

The “absurd” demand is only partially so, as Brudholm (2008: 112) has remarked: it is absurd to ask for the irreversible to be made reversible, but it is not absurd, as Améry also demands, that the Germans fully embrace Auschwitz as their negative heritage; instead of repressing it, that they share the viewpoint of the victim. However, Brudholm argues, and I agree, that the literal interpretation of Améry’s desire to abolish the irreversibility of time is the correct one, because past events cannot be disposed of. What Améry wants is an open, unfinished past (Brudholm 2008: 109). In that, he comes close to Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit*. This is also the stance adopted by Derrida (2006 [1993]), whose ethics, a response to a twisted sense of time, similarly destroys historicism and its limited sense of responsibility. Furthermore, by demanding the impossible, Améry brings ethics closer to the realm of politics, as any true radical politics is aware of its ultimate impossibility (lest it relapses into totalitarianism): the basic feature of democratic order is that the place of power is an empty place (Žižek 1989: 147) and of any emancipatory eschatology that the being-promise of its promise be respected (Derrida 2006: 131). For Améry, the wound can never be closed because negativity cannot be denied as an essential part of German identity.

It might seem as if we had strayed too far from contemporary archaeology, but it is not really so. Archaeology is now involved in a similar quest for keeping the past open and unfinished, a battle against unilinear time (Olivier 2008; Witmore 2009), and although this quest is not always imbued with political urgency or ethical concerns, it can be mobilised for political purposes and to re-imagine moral responsibility. I argue that archaeology is particularly apt at keeping the negativity of the past open, as Améry wished, precisely because it works essentially with the negative: archaeology works with the absence of people (and many things) (Fowles and Heupel 2013), and destroys the same past that it unveils (it discloses and nullifies the past).

Regarding the first point, archaeology does not work primarily with witnesses, monuments, or written words, but with the broken and mute remnants of the past. Archaeology then works with the unconstituted, which is not only the unsaid but the unsayable (Buchli and Lucas 2001a: 12). This has usually been considered a deficit of the discipline: we always want to say more than we can say; we want to meet—and listen to—the people of the past. We are

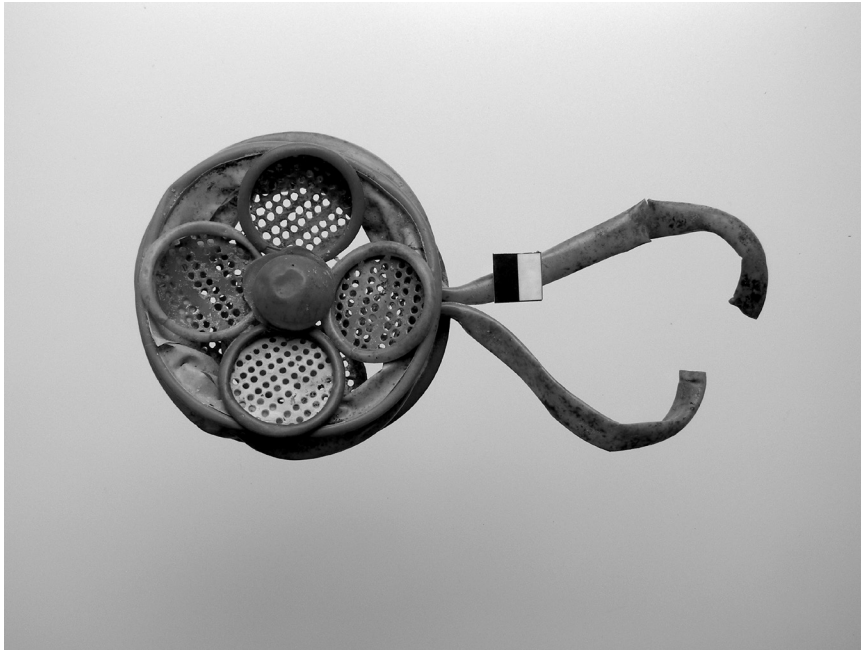
frustrated ethnographers. But in the case of a past of pure negativity, this deficit might be an advantage. Lyotard, speaking of the Holocaust, defended that only that which has not been transformed into a sign cannot be denied or forgotten (Assmann 2011: 250–251). While potentially everything can be transformed into a sign, there are things that resist symbolisation more successfully than others. This is the case of most humble archaeological artefacts, which hold a reserve, in Heideggerian terms (Heidegger 2002), even after being inserted into a discourse.

This is why the personal objects found in extermination camps, to which I referred in the previous chapter, are much more powerful than any monument of the Holocaust. As long as there are things, the past is not over and neither is the ethical responsibility toward the past. This is something that archaeologists know well, and so did the Nazis, who put so much effort into eliminating the traces of their crimes. Things force us to stare and this immediately creates an ethical binding: “The face of a neighbor”—writes Levinas (1981: 88)—“signifies for me an unexceptionable responsibility, preceding every free consent, every pact, every contract.” In the absence of the individual, the thing is her face. In the object, the frailty of the Other is made even more obvious—the “frailty of the one who needs you, who is counting of you”, as Levinas would put it (Wright et al. 1988: 171). For Levinas (1981: 151), the “here I am” of co-presence is prior to language or rather, it is “the meaning of language, before language scatters into words”. The here-I-am of the thing makes the preverbal being of the Other even more present and pressing; it makes its absence more acutely felt. There here-I-am of the thing is the here-I-am-not of the subject: it is the remnant, the remainder of the Other that remains to remind us of our responsibility and of our failure. Let me illustrate this with an archaeological example.

In 2011, a group of archaeologists conducted the exhumation of a mass grave in Palencia, Spain, with the remains of Catalina Muñoz Arranz, 37, who had been executed by firing squad after a fraudulent trial in 1936 (García-Rubio 2017: 163–164). She and other women had been killed during the first days of the war for being left-wing sympathisers. When the archaeologists were excavating the skeleton they found a colourful plastic object near her left thigh (Figure 4.3). The object looked brand new. Some doubted that it belonged to the grave, thought it could be an intrusion or a kind of macabre joke. But it could not be: the artefact was embedded in the same sediment as the bones. When it was fully excavated, it turned out to be a baby rattle, made of nitrocellulose. Catalina Muñoz was the mother of four children. Her fourth child was only eight months old when she was taken to prison. In the early morning of 22 September 1936, Catalina Muñoz Arranz faced the execution squad with a plastic baby rattle in the pocket of her apron or jacket. Her last thought was perhaps for her baby child—the same child who 75 years later would refuse to have his DNA tested to identify her remains.

The second advantage of archaeology in ethical terms is equally negative: the nullification of the past. Archaeology performs what Améry considered the “absurd” operation of making irreversible time reversible. Consider the case of mass grave exhumations in Spain. First, by exhuming the bones and the objects of the people who were killed during the war and the dictatorship, archaeology performs the temporal pleat that the relatives of the victims were asking for: time is suspended, past and present touch—1936 and 2016. Archaeology transforms a topography of trauma into a “topology of mourning” (Derrida 2006 [1993]: 121). But archaeology does not only suspend time: it also destroys the past. As is well known, archaeological excavation annihilates the object that it studies. It makes the mass graves disappear in the process of exposing them. This erasure of the material past is not the same as the erasure of the past events, for sure, but the destruction of the mass grave is directly implicated

**FIGURE 4.3** The frailty of the one who needs you: the baby rattle of Catalina Muñoz's son. Photograph by Almudena García-Rubio.



in the relatives achieving closure (Renshaw 2011). To a certain extent, the destruction of the material past works as if it was a destruction of the past as a whole.

The destruction is not total, however—it cannot be and it should not be. The erasure of the mass grave brings emotional closure, but not closing: a feeling that “one has achieved a definitive understanding, must be avoided” (Pollock and Bernbeck 2016: 30). The exhumation releases history from its historicist jail; it transforms a closed past severed from the present into a past that nurtures the present. Yet the same process that allows relatives to be at peace with themselves, transfers the responsibility of memory to the rest of society. We can say with Levinas (1981: 89) that the proximity to the mass grave “does not enter into the common time of clocks, which make meetings a possibility. It is a disturbance.” It is an ethical disturbance created by a temporal disturbance. We now have to assume the burden of negativity that has emerged from the mass grave (Figure 4.4). The mass grave as such may no longer be, but its void is still there. This is a physical void that may work as a space of remembrance (Bille et al. 2010: 12–13; Harrison 2012: 202; Holtorf 2015: 5–6), but also an ethical void that has to be embraced.

Resentment, *ressentiment*, is a form of resistance against all temptations to neutralise the negativity of the past. It is an indictment also against multivocal solutions that give voice to everybody and avoid taking sides. Politics and justice are about taking sides. And ethics is about how to take moral decisions. By respecting resentment, we keep the past open, present and relevant. Moreover, by keeping the past open, its political and ethical relevance is no longer dependent on the chronological nearness to us, but on its urgency, as Benjamin would put it. We have to feel *ressentiment* to prevent the wound from being prematurely closed. Sometimes a trowel can be a scalpel.



**FIGURE 4.4** The void of the mass grave. Here lay the bodies of twelve people who were assassinated after the Spanish Civil War. Author's photograph.



## *Nostalgia*

A section on nostalgia may seem out of place in a book that advocates a critical and consciously political approach to the past, since nostalgia tends to be identified either with apoliticism or reactionary politics. Here I would like to reclaim nostalgia as a critical concept, a weapon of resistance and a valid form of ethical relationship. Others before me have rehabilitated the concept: thus the notion of “critical nostalgia” deployed by Shannon Lee Dawdy (2016) or “reflective nostalgia” proposed by Svetlana Boym (2001)—also Hall (2000: 156–176). And nostalgia is being taken more seriously in heritage studies, not just as a problem, but also as a potential (Campbell et al. 2017). Nostalgia, however, has been regularly criticised by archaeologists, anthropologists, heritage managers and theorists, often on good grounds. Thus, the destruction of traditional societies carried out by colonial powers led to “imperialist nostalgia” (Rosaldo 1989); “structural nostalgia” seeks an impossible restoration of the perfect balance of an Edenic time before time (Herzfeld 1990); in heritage and cultural studies, nostalgia has been traditionally associated to conservative values, nationalism, colonialism, pastiche, commodification, a longing for a past that never was and misrepresentations of history in general (Steinmetz 2010; Ahmed 2010: 121–122; Smith and Waterton 2013: 51–52). We are regularly encouraged to let things go and to accept rupture, loss and the fact that destruction is construction and the past largely a fiction (Holtorf 2015, 2017; Kobińska 2015). Clinging to the past is a psychological problem (melancholia) and a political one (conservatism). bell hooks (2002: 205), in turn, opposes memory to nostalgia: memory is politicised, a struggle

against forgetting that serves to illuminate and transform the present, whereas nostalgia is the longing for something to be as it once was. Although there is an awareness that nostalgia can be many things, it is often reactionary or restorative nostalgia, as Boym calls it, that gets all the attention, whereas “good” nostalgia, if considered at all, is often seen as personal, largely apolitical and ironic—this is also the case with Boym (2001).

Yet the panorama is not necessarily so clear: Améry’s wish that the past of Auschwitz never existed is a longing for a past before Auschwitz, a form of nostalgia, then, which neither idealises the past nor is reactionary. Nadia Seremetakis (1994: 4) notes that in Greek, *nostalghía* has not the trivialising, romanticising connotations of its English derivative. The Greek etymology “evokes the transformative impact of the past as unreconciled historical experience”. It is a personal journey of return (*nostos*) full of pain (*alghós*) and emotion. For Andreas Huyssen (2006: 7), the negative visions of nostalgia within modernity can be explained because “nostalgia counteracts, even undermines linear notions of progress.” Huyssen (2006: 8) reflects on the current obsession with modern ruins and the kind of nostalgia that they evince and concludes that we are nostalgic of them because “they still seem to hold a promise that has vanished from our own age: the promise of an alternative future.” Richard Wolin extracts a similar lesson from his reading of Walter Benjamin:

The foremost danger of modernity is that its radical disrespect for tradition runs the grave risk of totally eradicating our links with the past, thus squandering that invaluable “temporal index of redemption” [Benjamin 1968: 254] which tradition contains. There is a promise of redemption that has been sedimented in the artefacts and ruins of traditional life, frustrated aspirations for a better life that have to be preserved and redeemed.

(Wolin 1994: 217–218)

Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) argued that it was not so much the past that had to be preserved, but “the redemption of past hopes” (see also Martin 2014: 1116). This is the gist of a critical nostalgia, the one that sees in the past “a multitude of potentialities, nonteleological possibilities of historic development” (Boym 2001: 82).

It can be argued that archaeology is well positioned to develop a critical nostalgia of this kind, because since the beginning, material culture studies and archaeology in particular have been a

melancholic attempt to grasp, materialize and bring into being that which has been already lost—and thereby deny that loss. It is an active form of resistance to the march of history—it is in Freudian terms, a refusal to mourn; a refusal to acknowledge the loss and move on and it is instead a pathological melancholic denial of this obvious loss, desperately attempting to hang on to something which is no longer there.

(Buchli 2010: 204)

This refusal to accept the march of history is not mere melancholia. It is the desire to avoid losing the “index of redemption” of the past. When I excavate a Republican trench of the Spanish Civil War, it is not nostalgia for a better past that I feel, of course, but nostalgia for a past not yet written nor fulfilled in which other possibilities were unfolding. In excavating the past, we discover traces of the future. Archaeologists, like the Jews, are prohibited from investigating the future (Benjamin 1968: 264). We are both, instead, instructed

in remembrance. While this, says Benjamin, strips the future of the magic promised by soothsayers (and I would add media gurus, coaches and influencers today), it does not turn it into a homogeneous, empty time. For in the material remnants of the past, we find an interrupted promise: a hope that things could have been different; that there is still room to make History.

My work is avowedly triggered by nostalgia, which has to do with my biographic experience, but not only. Unlike Boym, I consider my nostalgia a collective, not individual, affair. After all, I come from a region with at least three names to define the feeling (*nostalxia*, *morriña*, *saudade*). I am not a *flâneur* of the past. Or not only. Yet the fact that my nostalgia is shared does not make it reactionary or naïf, but rather potentially more powerful and critical, a source of empathy and collective action, “a link of affinity, suffering, and hope” (Derrida 2006 [1993]: 106) that knows of no political boundaries—a form of vernacular cosmopolitanism (González-Ruibal 2009b). My personal nostalgia stems from the feeling of a lost culture, which is manifested in a language that is no longer mine (Galician), even if I can speak it, and a culture that is no longer mine (that of Galician peasants), even if I know it well. Also, from a lost material culture: “Nostalgia as a longing for what is lost can quite literally be taken as a longing for things”, writes Shannon Lee Dawdy (2016: 149), and I agree. I see the childhood of my father as a remote world that has been shattered to pieces—a world that has collapsed in no time and that I could only document, archaeologically, in its agony. My nostalgia is founded on a material experience: of seeing, touching, using, smelling things (yokes, cows, sickles, manure) that connected me to different times, social experiences and biographies (Figure 4.5). And through them, I can now empathise with the pain of others who see their world dissolving as sand before their eyes, but in a much more terrible way than I ever experienced. I can understand the nostalgia of Tesfaye (his melancholia perhaps), a man who was displaced from his home in the Ethiopian highlands in the 1980s and forcibly resettled with his family by the communist government in an alien, hostile land (González-Ruibal 2006b). He survived real socialism, and war, and collective farms, steel silos, Soviet tractors and harvesters. His life has been interrupted twice—by modernism and by its collapse—and now his words are full of nostalgia for his homeland, the lofty stone houses where his family lived, the cool weather of the plateau, the cereals that he can no longer grow in the lowlands, his children dead or gone. Tesfaye’s nostalgia has little room for irony.

Through empathy, my nostalgia becomes more than a personal experience; it becomes an ethical stance. I can thus feel nostalgia for the multicultural Europe that was annihilated by war, genocide and dictatorship in the twentieth century, even if I have no personal relation whatsoever with that world. When I survey the beaches of Somaliland brimming with pottery from Persia, India and China, I feel nostalgia for those cosmopolitan encounters interrupted by capitalist imperialism and then fundamentalism. This is a critical nostalgia with utopian leanings. Critical in that it is aware of the iniquities of those vanished worlds (war, slavery, patriarchy, disease) and does not want the world to be exactly as it was; nostalgia in that it longs, nevertheless, for something of those pasts (their cultural richness, their acceptance of otherness); utopian in that it sees in those worlds elements to build different futures, different both from the present and from themselves. Nostalgia is political insofar as it can be mobilised as a critique of a specific situation of injustice, it is ethical in that it extends a sense of responsibility for the ghosts and for the past, and it is archaeological as long as it is predicated on the fragments and ruins of a past gone but still materially present and therefore liable to be mobilised, reactivated for the future.

**FIGURE 4.5** The last asymmetrical plough I ever saw at work in Galicia: Vilariño, Terra de Montes, summer of 1996. Author's photograph.



## ■ Summary

Ethics play an important role in archaeology today. In contemporary archaeology, they simply cannot be circumvented, as we deal with people who are alive and matters that are of pressing relevance for contemporary societies. In this chapter, I have offered a critique of the hegemony of the ethical discourse in archaeology, which has largely developed at the expense of politics.



My aim, however, has not been to rule out ethics, but rather to defend a “political ethics” (Hamilakis 2007) that explores troubling dilemmas and expands our moral imagination beyond rules and codes. I have thus examined some issues that are specific to the practice of contemporary archaeology: witnessing, temporality and affect.

In relation to the first topic, archaeology is situated in an ambiguous position. On the one hand, there is something obscene and voyeuristic in the way we see the intimacy of others through the persistence of their material traces. At the same time, the privilege of seeing is also a moral burden, because we become immediately responsible towards what we see. This is particularly so in the case of the victims of history, but not only. The archaeological work of documenting the minutiae of daily life, which finds resonances in much contemporary art, is a way of caring for others, for ordinary people whose lives will vanish from History. This ethical commitment does not necessarily have well-defined temporal boundaries. I compare the temporality of archaeological ethics with that of jurisdiction in relation to crimes against humanity. Both practices, archaeology and international law, do not abide by the usual chronological limitations and extend their moral commitment towards the past. The same happens with other temporal regimes, such as those of political and indigenous activism. Likewise, archaeology can also extend its ethical commitment from the present into the deep past, blurring temporal hierarchies of care.

The last section of the chapter has dealt with affect. The remains of the contemporary past elicit strong feelings, both positive and negative. Here I have reclaimed two emotions that have been regularly criticised: resentment and nostalgia. Although they are ambiguous, they can be both productively mobilised by a critical archaeology. They have in common the experience of pain and a refusal to let the past go. I find the notion of resentment (or *ressentiment*) powerful in the way that has been eloquently described by Holocaust survivor Jean Améry. His impossible demand that the past had never happened is a reminder that we have to accept fully the negativity of history. Nostalgia, in turn, is a complex affect that has been much maligned for its reactionary manifestations and at best reclaimed as an ironic, individual engagement with history. My take on nostalgia, instead, is predicated on the Benjaminian idea that objects from the past hold a promise for the future; they are an “index of redemption” that archaeologists can awaken. This is particularly true of the vestiges of nonmodern societies swept away by supermodernity and of emancipatory political struggles that have been defeated. Their material persistence provides an opportunity to imagine more promising futures, which are at the same time different from the present and rooted in the past.

## Note

- 1 [www.nytimes.com/2017/05/24/us/new-orleans-monuments-confederate-history.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/24/us/new-orleans-monuments-confederate-history.html?_r=0) (accessed 17 September 2018).



# 5

## Aesthetics

**A**ESTHETICS MAY REFER to at least two different things: on the one hand, everything that affects the senses (Hamilakis 2014; Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014b); on the other hand, the specific form of affecting the senses that is art. Pétursdóttir and Olsen (2014b: 15) rightly criticise that it has been the restrictive notion of aesthetics as art that has become dominant. They oppose to such a view the archaic conception of aesthetics that maintains that “the aesthetic experience is a reaction triggered by an element or force inherent to the very reality encountered.” Art, in fact, rather than aesthetics, has been occupying a growing space in the archaeology of the contemporary past (e.g. the forum on art/archaeology edited by Thomas et al. 2017) and in archaeology more generally (Russell and Cochrane 2014). As part of the creative turn in the humanities (Thomas et al. 2017), art has been deployed in archaeology for different reasons: to find theoretical inspiration (Renfrew 2003; Knappett 2006; Harrison 2011; Bailey 2018), to produce a hybrid of art and science (Pearson and Shanks 2001; Shanks and Svabo 2013; Bailey 2013) or to encourage aesthetic work in archaeology (Cochrane and Russell 2007; Bailey 2014a, 2014b). Collaborations between artists and archaeologists working on the contemporary have also become common (Schofield 2005; Schofield et al. 2006; González-Ruibal 2013). With some exceptions (Hamilakis 2007; Hamilakis and Theou 2013; Bailey 2017), however, the relationship between politics and aesthetics has received less attention than art as a mode of manifestation and communication. This, despite the fact that an important part of modern and contemporary art is strongly political: since Goya’s engravings and paintings, politics have been on the artistic agenda for over two centuries. Art and aesthetics are particularly relevant for contemporary archaeology. First, I will argue, because contemporary art and archaeology share the same aesthetic regime. Second, because the materiality of the recent past and the unspeakable events that are often associated with it demand a particular mode of manifestation, for which the conventional rhetoric of the discipline is often insufficient or inadequate.

In this chapter, I will be engaging not so much with art as with the philosophy of aesthetics (which includes art but goes beyond it). I am particularly interested in the connection between ethics, politics and aesthetic regimes. For my research, I draw inspiration from the work of Jacques Rancière. I will be using his ideas as a guide in two different ways: I will first try to flesh out the similarities between the aesthetic regime of art and archaeology, with their political consequences, and then will propose a poetics for archaeology based on Rancière’s poetics of knowledge.

### ■ The aesthetic regimes of art and archaeology

Archaeology is a way of engaging with things, or, more generally, with the sensible world. Art is another way and so is art history. Curiously enough, despite the fact that art historians and

philosophers have been reflecting on materiality, images and discourses for five centuries, cross-fertilisation between archaeology and the theory of art has been limited (but see Shanks 1999; Olivier 2008). In fact, it could be argued that the mode of reasoning and operating of archaeology, as condensed in the archaeological metaphor, has left a deeper imprint in art theory than vice versa (e.g. Didi-Huberman 2008a, 2013a). What I would like to do, through the work of those who have theorised art and aesthetics, is to show that archaeology works within the aesthetic regime that is characteristic of modernism and in this sense it does not differ dramatically from other forms of cultural production in our times (Shanks 2001). I am not interested, however, in performing an act of disenchantment, deconstruction, or historicisation. Rather, by comparing the aesthetic regime of modern art with that of archaeology, I would like to do two things: first, to push forward the potential of the discipline from an aesthetic and political point of view, and second, to contextualise the mode of thinking and operating of contemporary archaeology.

Jacques Rancière distinguishes two different regimes in art. What he calls the “representative” regime would have characterised artistic productions until the late nineteenth century. Between the 1880s and 1920s, a new regime is born, that can be called properly “aesthetic” (Rancière 2000: 31; 2003: 27). The roots of such a regime are, however, older, and can be traced back to Romanticism, in the transition between the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Rancière 2000: 35; 2013). In any case, they pre-date any desire of artistic rupture, which would be characteristic of the vanguards and with which modern and contemporary art has been usually associated. Therefore, the movement from the representative to the abstract is definitely not what defines this new regime. What is at stake is a reinterpretation of what art does (Rancière 2000: 35). The difference between the representative and the aesthetic regimes of art has to be found in the distribution between the visible and the sayable (Rancière 2003: 20). In the representative regime of art, words make seeing a visible that is not present or make visible what does not belong to the visible (an idea or feeling). The aesthetic regime of art does something completely different: art is not anymore the codified expression of an idea or feeling. It is not any longer a translation. Instead, “it is the way in which things themselves talk and are silent” (Rancière 2003: 21). This silence is twofold: it is the indexical eloquence of things and traces that do not have a discourse and it is the very resistance of things to talk (Rancière 2003: 21–22). This is familiar terrain for archaeologists who are attuned to contemporary theoretical debates. The description fits well the “beyond discourse” paradigm (Olsen 2003, 2010).

But coincidences do not stop here. The way the aesthetic regime of art works with a materiality that does not need—indeed, refuses—translation is also comparable to archaeology. Rancière (2003: 54) speaks of the “great parataxis” characteristic of the aesthetic regime of art. This is “a chaotic juxtaposition, a great indifferent mixture of significations and materialities” (Rancière 2003: 53–54). This is clearly not alien to contemporary discourses on unruly things (Olsen 2003, 2010). According to Rancière, parataxis would have been a staple procedure of art since the mid-nineteenth century, when it first appears not in the visual arts, but in literature, in the great French novels of the time (Rancière 2003: 141): disparate objects, meanings, sounds and sensations appear together in the same scenes. Archaeologist Michael Shanks, however, would take parataxis back much earlier in time. The term, after all, is ancient Greek, and refers to the meaning created by the “friction between fragments” (Shanks 1999: 4, 74–75; 2004: 152). Shanks sees in the art of the archaic Greek cities some images that have fewer syntactic, that is, narrative links, than others. Those less syntactic images resort to parataxis, that is, juxtapositions, to produce meaning. Still, it can be argued, with Rancière, that both syntactic and paratactic images in ancient Greece could be translated

semiotically, something which will not be the case anymore, or not always, in the aesthetic regime of art. Thus, the philosopher notes that modern parataxis relies on the “potency of contact” (*puissance de contact*), not on translation or explanation (Rancière 2003: 65; also Didi-Huberman 2008a). Modern parataxis can be better defined as a shock, which is produced by the coming together of “heterogeneities and the association of incompatibles”, including heterogeneous temporalities (Rancière 2000: 37).

Michael Shanks is one of the few archaeologists to have reflected on the concept of parataxis in order to create work that challenges conventional archaeological accounts based on linear narratives (Pearson and Shanks 2001; Shanks 2004). In one of his pieces (Shanks 2004), he interweaves descriptions of three rooms located in different places and times: archaic Corinth in Greece, nineteenth-century Wales and contemporary London. There is no obvious connection between the three: they are juxtaposed paratactically as fragments. Shanks’s aim is avowedly non-explanatory. What he intends to do is “*making manifest* some of the features of these conglomerations of people, things and events” (Shanks 2004: 152; original emphasis). Thus, we first read about a room that is

at one end of the thatched farmhouse of Lletherneuadd-uchaf, in the parish of Llanfihangel-ar-arth, near Llandysul in west Wales. At the other end is a cow house. In the middle, a large kitchen, with dairy to the back. The windows in the thick stone walls are typically small, the interior dark

and then about another room which

is on the uppermost of a series of terraces built up the hill to the east of the harbor of Perachora, on the peninsula opposite ancient Corinth. The stone foundations are still there. They were excavated by Humphry Payne and members of the British School at Athens between 1930 and 1933

and still another room in 1980

in a rundown part of the East End of London. Up a damaged staircase above an abandoned synagogue, a door is unlocked for the first time in 11 years. The room is in a mess, some later recalled; it had been exposed to the elements; people had been in.  
(Shanks 2004: 152–154)

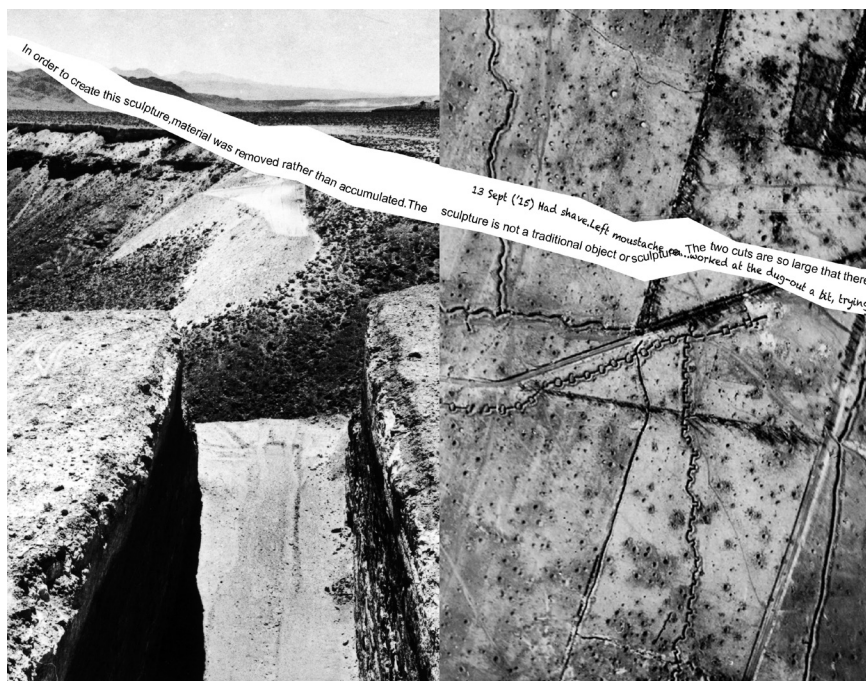
The piece contains detailed descriptions of the spaces, lists of things without further explanation, literary fragments, forensic documents. In a sense, Shanks performs an act of presencing pasts that is beyond discourse or at least open to multiple discourses and interpretations (Shanks 2004: 151), but the juxtaposition of fragments is not arbitrary. Some themes are recurring and there is a common thread that runs through them and that has to do with bodies, power and cultural change.

Another example of archaeological parataxis is the work of Douglass Bailey (2013). In his “Cutting the Earth//Cutting the Body”, he juxtaposes not words, like Shanks, but images. The images are of the earth cut by an artistic project, military trenches, a quarry and archaeologists, followed by images of a medieval representation of Christ and a woman undergoing facial surgery (Figure 5.1). Hinging in between both sets of images, there is a photo of an archaeologist digging human remains—a link between the excavation of the earth and the body. Like Shanks, Bailey is not interested in offering a conventional narrative; rather, his

work is presented as “non-linear and proximal, without closure, and inviting exploration and the non-explanatory” (Bailey 2013: 345). Other works by the same author resort to the paratactical procedures to manifest something new. This is the case with *Unearthed*, an exhibition and book on prehistoric figurines (Bailey et al. 2010). Interestingly, the author and collaborators put a very conventional subtitle to a very heterodox publication: *A comparative study of Jōmon dogū and Neolithic figurines*. Yet the study has little to do with traditional archaeological comparisons. Archaeological comparisons look for either synchrony or cultural analogy in order to find chronological or interpretive clues. In the case of synchronic comparanda, the authors would have sought figurines from different Neolithic communities. In the second case, they would have looked for statuettes produced by societies from any period, but whose socioeconomic organisation is comparable to that of Neolithic societies. Yet Bailey and colleagues go well beyond the usual analogies and introduce discordant elements: toys, cartoons, and works by modern artists that have dealt with miniaturisation. The mere juxtaposition forces us to see prehistoric figurines in a different way without the need for an explanation that specifies what lesson should be extracted from the comparison.

The work of Shanks and Bailey shows that there is nothing that cannot be manifested. We may not translate it into a representational narrative, but this does not mean that we cannot render it sensible. In that, they share the standpoint of the aesthetic regime of art, which puts into question the idea that there are phenomena that are unrepresentable. Rancière (2003: 145) notes that such phenomena (most typically, the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis) cannot be represented with the language of the representative regime of art,

**FIGURE 5.1** Making parataxis: Doug Bailey juxtaposes artist Michael Heizer’s “sculpture in reverse” with an aerial photograph of First World War trenches. The friction raises questions: can we understand the trenches as a large negative sculpture? Why do we break the earth?



but they are not inapprehensible to the devices of the aesthetic regime. The genocide has been powerfully manifested in the poetry of Paul Celan or the paintings of Anselm Kiefer. In neither case do they offer a realist representation of the events, a story. The same aesthetic regime has been adopted by most memorials of the Holocaust. A good example is Harburg's *Monument against Fascism* (1986) by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz: a 12-metre-tall column that gradually sunk into the ground.

The non-representative art, argues Rancière (2003: 153), is in fact an art without unrepresentable-ness. But how does the aesthetic regime of art manifest what is deemed unrepresentable under the language of the figurative regime? The answer is collage, montage, fragmentation: these are the techniques that characterise the aesthetic regime and that are constitutive of its paratactic manifestation (Rancière 2003: 65). Collage, montage, fragmentation ground the work of Shanks and Bailey (see a reflection in Pearson and Shanks 2001: 51–52, 95–96). Montage, writes art historian Didi-Huberman (2013a), “escapes teleologies, makes visible survivals, anachronisms, encounters of contradictory temporalities that affect each object, each event, each person, each gesture”. His language is avowedly archaeological. He writes that “trying to do an archaeology is always to risk putting together fragments of surviving things necessarily heterogeneous and anachronistic, because they come from separate places and times disjointed by lacunas” (Didi-Huberman 2008b: 4). For Didi-Huberman, montage and archaeology are interchangeable concepts and this is because for him the element of temporal heterogeneity is crucial in the definition of artistic parataxis. Yet the archaeological is not restricted to parataxis—it also appears in anything that involves friction of heterogeneous materialities and temporalities. Thus, Didi-Huberman (2008b: 325) imagines a new art historian, the *ichnologue*, a researcher of traces, who “knows about anachronisms, who knows, for example, about the superposition of modern and prehistoric traces without being always able to discern them”.

What I am trying to argue here is different from other approaches to art and archaeology: I am not saying that archaeology has to find inspiration in art. Both Shanks and Bailey have produced original work influenced by contemporary art and I believe that art remains a strong source of inspiration for archaeologists (González-Ruibal 2008). What I am trying to do here, however, is more symmetrical: to show that both the aesthetic regime of art and the aesthetic regime of contemporary archaeology are similar. Parataxis, whether we use it consciously or not, is inherent to both. We should then ask: is the paratactical hegemony coincidental? If it is not, is it an issue of mentality, that is, of the materialisation of a modernist worldview? I do not want to downplay the relevance of collective mentalities in this process, but, in my opinion, parataxis is a symptom of something else: it is the best way of capturing the reality of the modern, and particularly supermodern, world. Reality is paratactic. On 23 August 1942, Emmanuel Evzerikhin walked through a square of Stalingrad reduced to rubble after a German raid. In the middle of the square, there is a sculpture—intact—of children dancing around a crocodile. The children dance oblivious to the world frozen in death around them. Evzerikhin's photograph is one of the most famous images of the siege of Stalingrad (Jouannais 2012: 71–72). There is nothing staged in it. There are no weapons or soldiers or corpses in it. But the nature of total war is revealed in the photo in obscure, unspeakable ways.

What artists do, then, is simply work with a world that is increasingly fragmented, contradictory, heterogeneous and heterochronic. It is not a coincidence that the aesthetic regime of art and the evidentiary regime of knowledge (Ginzburg 1980; Crossland 2009; Agamben 2009), in which archaeology was born, emerged at the same time. While artists create with the fragments of a world that is shattering into pieces, philosophers reflect on the explosion, and



archaeologists and historians work with the bits and pieces that are left. The world is made of spontaneous collages. We, archaeologists, only have to map them. If our work looks aesthetically pleasing, it is only because artists were the first to notice the paratactic nature of the modern world and worked it into art. We can no longer see the palimpsest of a ruin as detached from a particular aesthetic regime. We appraise it aesthetically, in the sense of a manifestation of beauty. Tragic, even repulsive at times, but beautiful all the same.

Parataxis, however, is something that we, archaeologists, find whenever we conduct a survey or an excavation. It is not something that we create, except in the sense of the excavation as a creative act: we are cartographers of a broken world that no longer makes sense. Ware with the stamp *Schönheit der Arbeit* (“beauty of labour”) in a Nazi labour camp is a parataxis full of cruel irony, which makes even more explicit the perverseness of the Nazi regime (Pollock and Bernbeck 2016: 26). But this is not something that archaeologists made as an aesthetic critique of Nazism: it was *actually* found. Juxtapositions do not always produce sense in an obvious way. In any excavation that I have conducted in a Spanish Civil War site, I have found bewildering combinations of elements, often together in the same context: perfume bottles and grenades, anti-aircraft shrapnel and earrings, a coin of Napoleon III, an M1914 Hotchkiss machine-gun magazine and a candle, a flowerbed cut by a latrine, a Remington bullet from 1870, tree stumps, Bronze Age pottery, a chamber pot, plastic combs, barbed wire, rat bones, a Visigothic skeleton, condoms, a piece from a gas mask, an Italian M-16 Adrian helmet, a scallop shell, etc., etc. (Figure 5.2). These elements can be catalogued, classified, arranged in chronological order and transformed into a story. And I have done that, in fact (González-Ruibal 2016a). But then they are deprived of something crucial: mystery.

**FIGURE 5.2** Finding parataxis: a porcelain figurine of the Divine Shepherdess and a swastika from a Spanish Civil War site in Madrid. Author’s photograph.



Mystery is a specific aesthetic effect of parataxis that is again shared by both art and archaeology. The archaeological connotations of mystery are obvious (Shanks 1992: 54), even at a popular level (Holtorf 2005). Mystery is the product of heterogeneity (Pearson and Shanks 2001: 166; Rancière 2009a: 57), that is, of the linking of apparently unrelated or contradictory elements. Each of Shanks's rooms, "references mystery and discovery . . . In each room, mystery is both created and then resolved in mundane modernity just as it becomes disturbing" (Shanks 2004: 151). Likewise, the juxtaposition of cut bodies and earth in Bailey is uncanny without being possible to tell exactly why. The overlappings that I found in my work are also mysterious and intriguing, in a way that the objects and features would not be if taken one by one. Mystery is also present in Heidegger's (2002) philosophy of art. For him, the essence of the work of art consists in the unconcealment of the being, in truth as revelation (*aletheia*). However, the work of art is not a simple act of disclosure, an act of absolute openness. The work opens a new world (*Welt*) and at the same time sets forth the earth (*Erde*)—which stands for what cannot be known. World and earth—revelation and concealment—are in constant opposition, in a battle (Heidegger 2002: 26, 37), but they also depend on each other. This denial of absolute openness belongs to the essence of truth as unconcealment. Truth is mysterious: "Haunting; evocation; the ineffable remainder even after scrupulous description; mystery; independence: these are the life of things, discovered in loss or ruin" (Pearson and Shanks 1997: 45).

We can paraphrase Goddard and say that, like cinema, archaeology is not an art and is not a technique: it is a mystery (Rancière 2003: 70). There is perhaps not a work of art that epitomises this idea of paratactic mystery better than Marcel Duchamp's *Étant Donnés*, in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. At first sight, we only see an old gate. But the gate has a peephole. Through this peephole, we can see part of the body of a naked woman, lying on a bed of twigs, who is holding a gas lamp in her hand. In the background, there is a cascade. The heterogeneity of elements seems readily available for a symbolic interpretation. Now if we try to decode the mystery, we do not understand the meaning of the work of art, which is to lack meaning. The mystery of the work is how it makes sensible the very notion of mystery. Like in other works belonging to the aesthetic regime of art, there is no referent, no mimesis and no story. It is a shock and a reflection on that shock. It plays with gaze, memory, imagination and desire, but it is not about any of these things. As Yeats said (and many others have repeated), "poems are not about anything." Contemporary archaeology can be about nothing either, and still be powerful. Perhaps more powerful than when it tries to tell a story or to explain the world. It can embody the experience of the contemporary era, its pain and its drama. Like the spectator of *Étant Donnés*, archaeologists gaze through a peephole and what they see is a heterogeneous mixture of things, times and fragmentary tales.

## ■ The politics of the sensible

The aesthetic regime of art is political in at least three ways: in its critical deployment of parataxis, in its rendering sensible and redistributing of the sensible, and in the staging of the demos. Let us return first to parataxis. Rancière (2003: 66) notes that the encounter of incompatibles typical of parataxis can be the expression of a desire or a dream, but it can also be the reality of domination and violence. The work of parataxis here then is about organising a shock, manifesting the strangeness in the familiar to discover another order that is only disclosed with the violence of a conflict. The point

is to make a world appear behind another (Rancière 2003: 67). This has been a common mode of operation in contemporary art: capitalist devastation beneath the happiness of consumption, for instance (Rancière 2009: 51). This, argues Rancière (2009: 52), is a canonical procedure of delegitimation: to expose “the dirty little hidden/obvious secret underlying every form of sublimity”. This is what I have called desublimation or defetishisation in the chapter on politics (Chapter 3).

We have seen in the previous section how mystery was associated with parataxis. However, its political work is different to that of desublimation, because if desublimation works through the shock produced by accentuating heterogeneity, mystery emphasises connections (Rancière 2009: 58). Both are constitutive of history: the discontinuous line of revealing shocks and the continuum of co-presence (Rancière 2003: 70). If organising shocks is the way in which the artist or archaeologist renders visible the dissensus—the conflict inherent to social life—mystery makes community by enacting co-presence. This has important political implications.

I am interested here in two forms of co-presence made possible through archaeology: one diachronic and the other synchronic. Diachronic co-presence is the connection made between different pasts and presents through archaeological acts of discovery and documentation, but also through non-disciplinary activities conducted by communities, which range from ritual activities to the mere fact of dwelling (Hamilakis 2011). This is related to the “copresence of heterogeneous temporalities” which Rancière (2003: 37) identifies with the aesthetic regime of art and that we could relate to the chronopolitics of contemporary critical archaeology (Witmore 2013). These chronopolitics state the connection between indigenous communities in the present and archaeological artefacts and landscapes in the past, which have been separated by the activities of purification in which colonial administration, antiquarianism, archaeology and heritage management engaged for a very long time (Matthews 2007; Schmidt and Mrozowski 2013; Gnecco and Lippert 2015; Haber and Shepherd 2015). It also states the contemporaneity of technologies and material worlds and denies the existence of anachronisms, at least as matter out of time (Lucas 2015): there is no matter out of time. There are only operations of temporal cleansing (Witmore 2013, and see Chapter 6). The second form of co-presence is the incorporation of others into the community of Us. This is particularly relevant for the archaeology of the contemporary world, which is often posited as the “archaeology of us”, with this us often being Westerners. However, archaeology has the potential to expand this us and make it a diverse community of peoples and materialities, with radically different ontologies.

By ruining the system of representation that had prevailed hitherto, the aesthetic regime also destroyed the system where the dignity of the subject required a specific genre of representation (tragedy for nobles, comedy for commoners) (Rancière 2000: 48) and allowed the anonymous and ordinary to be visible on equal footing with the high and noble (Rancière 2003: 134). The destruction of this hierarchical system begins early in the transition between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, during the Romantic Era. At that time, there was a vindication of the Flemish and Dutch genre painting of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Rancière 2013: 28–29). Rancière (2003: 89) notes that what was appreciated by Hegel in these paintings is not the description of bourgeois or peasant life and its appurtenances, but the autonomisation of these elements (Rancière 2013: 31): an “epiphany of the visible”. It is not representation that is at stake, but presence (Gumbrecht 2004). Yet the epiphany of the visible in Rancière has a specific political quality—because what the epiphany demonstrates is the “equality of the visible” (Rancière 2003: 137). When

there are no proper subjects of art anymore, everything is suited to artistic representation. All things exist in a level of equality—*plan d'égalité* (Rancière 2003: 121)—in relation to their possibilities of aesthetic manifestation. A revolutionary deputy of the Second French Republic, Théophile Thoré, praised the art of Van Eyck, Memling and Van der Weyden, because they paid the same attention “to the cottage and to the finest architecture” and “all classes of people, all the particularities of domestic life, all the manifestations of nature are accepted and glorified” (cited in Rancière 2013: 29). This stance was later taken by painters, novelists and poets. The same mixture of peoples and things, for example, appears in the poetry of Walt Whitman, whose *Songs of Occupations* mixes “grain and manure, marl and clay, bins and mangers, tongs, hammer, jointer and smoothing plane” (Rancière 2001: 67).

Is this not what archaeology does, documenting with the same zeal all sorts of things and social classes? Now we take for granted that archaeology is the discipline of “small things” (Deetz 1977), but this was a battle that had to be won. In some quarters, as late as the 1970s, scholars bemoaned the transformation of the discipline into a sociology of the past, in which everything goes, instead of remaining a history of ancient art (Bianchi Bandinelli 1976). Rancière (2000: 50–51) reminds us that “finding the symptoms of a time, of a society or a civilization in the tiny details of ordinary life, explaining the surface through subterranean layers and reconstructing worlds through their vestiges was a literary program before it became scientific.” There is a coincidence here between the mode of visibility of art and the mode of visibility of science in the late nineteenth century. Both are interested in reading the signs of silent things (Ginzburg 1980; Crossland 2009).

What does making visible mean? In archaeology, a concern for visibilising subalterns has been usually expressed as a need for storytelling. At least this has been the case until the turn to things. For the things, paraded as the new subalterns (Fowles 2016), it is not so much stories that are demanded, but visibility (Pétursdóttir 2012; Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014b). I would argue that this is precisely what is needed in relation to human subalterns: what we have to do is to incorporate them into the realm of the sensible. We need a regime and a mode of visibility that brings into the picture all sorts of materialities, not so much as an end in itself as a service to the people that are enmeshed in those material worlds. It is not that we can do without alternative stories that challenge hegemonic narratives focused on the dominant classes, but in fact those have to be understood as part of the wider work of redistribution that incorporates and renders sensible the subaltern groups. I am not sure that those who have worked with homeless people have much radically new *to say* about them—at least things that could not have been said by ethnographers or sociologists. Neither is *the story* of an Iranian transgender *per se* revealing (Dezhamkhooy and Papoli Yazdi 2013). The same can be argued for the corpses of the thousands of Republicans exhumed from mass graves in Spain (Ferrándiz 2006, 2013; Renshaw 2011), whose *stories* have been told by relatives and historians.

What is truly important in all these cases is the inclusion of these victims of contemporary history in the realm of the sensible (Camp 2011: 292–294). We should not underestimate the political effects of making things public (González-Ruibal 2007). Showing the bones of the killed during the Spanish Civil War has done more in the last two decades to change perceptions of the war and the dictatorship than many pages written by historians. The mother of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African American beaten and killed in Mississippi in 1955 for allegedly flirting with a white woman, insisted that the body of her son being shown in an open casket. The display of the abject, disfigured body was crucial during the Civil Rights Movement, because it forced into every American home a reality that had been made invisible hitherto and geographically contained (Harold and DeLuca 2005).

Redistributing the sensible means abolishing the distinction between what deserves and does not deserve to be part of our collective memory: in the case of archaeology, working with the materiality of marginalised communities is making a statement that the discipline is not anymore about human evolution or spectacular civilizations only, it is also about the poor, LGBTQ people, victims of political violence. It means that these people matter. It is the performative act of archaeology that enables visualisation, more than its conventional storytelling qualities, that makes the difference. It is showing bones, dirty mattresses, cloth, handcuffs, plastic boxes, shell casings. We force people to see what many would prefer to be concealed forever, for the sake of social consensus and peace or to keep a good conscience.

In that, we do the same work as James Agee and Walker Evans, when they visited and documented the lives of poor white sharecroppers in Alabama during the time of the Great Depression (Agee and Evans 1988 [1940]; Rancière 2013; Didi-Huberman 2013b). The journalists abandoned the conventional language of reportage and produced an account full of inventories, disrupted chronologies, unending sentences (parataxis at its best), while they focused on trivial things, a “minute proportion”, writes Rancière (2013: 250), “of the elements that are gathered in the infinite and unrepeatable intertwining relations between human beings, and environment, events and things that ends up in the actuality of these few lives”.

The table is set for dinner:

The yellow and green checked oilcloth is worn thin and through at the corners and along the edges of the table and along the ridged edges of boards in the table surface, and in one or two places, where elbows have rested a great deal, it is rubbed through in a wide hole. In its intact surfaces it shines prettily and bluntly reflects the window and parts of the objects that are on it . . .

(Agee and Evans 1988 [1940]: 180)

The point, follows Rancière (2013: 253), is to “restore each element of the inventory to the dignity of what it is: a response to the violence of a condition, simultaneously the product of an art of living and doing and a scar”. To see each thing “as a consecrated object and a scar”: to see the beauty of others and their pain. There is something of this in Jason de León’s work with undocumented migrants; de León’s evocative prose is matched by the powerful images of Michael Wells (de León 2015). This can also be found in the work of Maryam Dezhamkhooy and Leila Papoli Yazdi (2010, 2013) with the anonymous people of Iran.

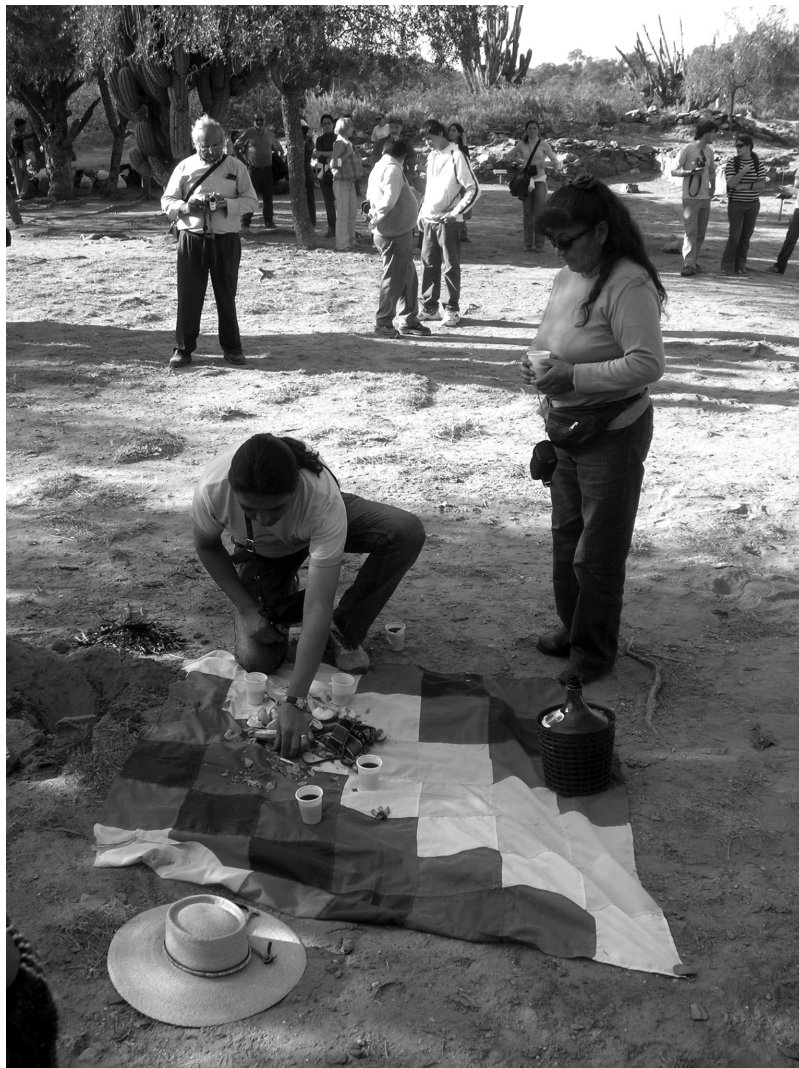
It is the archaeological act of manifestation and inclusion that brings together aesthetics and politics. This brings me to my last point. The issue of manifestation is crucial. In Latin languages, manifestation (*manifestación*, *manifestazione*, *manifestação*) is both the act of making something manifest—visible, sensible—and the political act of public protestation: a demonstration. When I say that archaeology or art manifests, then, I mean not only that it visibilises, but also that it performs a political act. Archaeology not only manifests by exposing the past, it also manifests by doing it publicly, in front of witnesses (Moshenska 2009b, 2013a). By becoming a theatre, archaeology can embrace the aesthetic dimension of politics. This consists in “the staging of dissensus—of a conflict of sensory worlds—by subjects who act as if they were the people, which is made of the uncountable count of the anyone” (Rancière 2009b: 11). Rancière here makes clear its differences with the political thought of Jacques Derrida (2005). For Derrida, the place of the demos cannot be occupied. His is an ethical stance based on the *hospes*, the guest that is the absolute Other, to whom we owe infinite responsibility and who is to come (Rancière 2009b: 13).



Rancière, instead, argues for an aesthetical, not ethical understanding of democracy. This means that against the phantasmatic ever-deferred *hospes*, he opposes the presence and materiality of the people that act *as if* they were the demos. This *as if* is enacted by taking and staging, physically, the place of the demos.

What does this have to do with archaeology? A lot. When an indigenous community engages in a ritual at an archaeological site (Figure 5.3); when relatives, friends and members of grass-roots association attend an exhumation of a mass grave or participate in its excavation, they are fulfilling the aesthetic dimension of politics: they are materially taking the place of the demos. An excellent example of this aesthetical staging of the people through an

**FIGURE 5.3** Taking the place of the demos: members of an indigenous community perform a ritual at an archaeological site near Catamarca, Argentina. Author's photograph.



archaeological act is the excavation of the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin during the 1980s, to which I have already referred (see Chapter 3). The excavation of this site was a manifestation in both the sense of revelation of something that was hidden and in the political sense of demonstration. Above all, it was the people taking the place of the demos visibly, in front of the city, through the archaeological act of digging. They were saying that history had been whisked away from the people and they were retaking it, shovel in hand. The same operation has been performed since the mid-1980s in Argentina, Uruguay and Chile by the grass-roots initiatives that have dealt with the trauma of dictatorship (Taylor 2006; Zarankin et al. 2012; Marín Suárez 2016). Exhumations of unmarked graves and excavations of clandestine centres of detention have become forms of “trauma-driven performance protest” (Taylor 2006: 1674). NGOs and civil collectives take the initiative and actively participate in the research process, which is conducted publicly (e.g. Bianchi 2008). Similar acts developed in Spain during the 1970s, when relatives of those killed by right-wing violence undertook the task of recovering the bodies of their beloved ones (Serrano Moreno 2016). After an interruption of two decades, the process resumed in 2000, with greatly increased visibility (Ferrándiz 2013). In all these cases, the act of digging is an act of visibilisation, not only of the crimes of the State and its victims, but of the community who takes the place of the People to fight for justice.

## ■ A poetics of things

In the previous section, we have seen that archaeology shares an aesthetic regime with contemporary art and that such an aesthetic regime implies a redistribution of the sensible that has important political implications. The problem, however, remains for archaeology: how should we manifest or mediate the past as archaeologists in a way that is both politically and aesthetically powerful? This is particularly urgent in the case of contemporary archaeology, because our era demands specific ways of manifesting its excesses and contradictions. Writing, photography and visual media more generally have been explored as forms of mediating the past in original and creative ways (Pearson and Shanks 2001; Joyce 2002; Witmore 2004; Byrne 2007; Dezhnamkhooy and Papoli Yazdi 2010; Shanks and Svabo 2013; Bailey 2013, 2014b; Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014b; Van Dyke and Bernbeck 2015). In this section, I will sketch out a poetics of things, which pays less attention to the specific media that are utilised (visual, textual, or aural), and more to the ethical, political and aesthetical implications of bringing things to the fore.

Before archaeologists became enamoured with audiovisual media, they were with text. During the 1990s and early 2000s there was a surge of interest in storytelling (Praetzelis 1998). Many practitioners considered that the dry descriptions or normative explanations of the past that had dominated hitherto were unsatisfactory. They felt that they needed to tell stories about the past so as to make the past come alive. Archaeology had, in fact, a long tradition of engaging storytellers, going back to Leonard Woolley, Mortimer Wheeler and, more recently, James Deetz, whose *In Small Things Forgotten* (1977) has been highly influential. New experimental ways of narrating, however, appeared in the 1990s, in which personal experiences, archaeological data and new forms of rhetoric intermingled (Schrire 1995; Edmonds 2002; Joyce 2002; Byrne 2007, 2013). The origin of this renewed concern with writing can be sought in two different sources: early post-processual theory and postmodern ethnography. Regarding the first, the crisis of the scientific aspirations of New Archaeology opened the door to more creative forms of approaching the past; as it was assumed that we could never reconstruct it exactly as it was, then some room existed for imagination (see Gibb 2000). Also, the move from the

emphasis on explanation and grand narratives, characteristic of New Archaeology, to a focus on comprehension, experience and the micro also made storytelling a viable strategy for investigating the past.

This coincided with the belated arrival in archaeology of the linguistic turn, with its obsession with text and its basic tenet that language constitutes reality. Some works from the 1980s and early 1990s, in fact, denote the influence from this school of thought: Ian Hodder (1995), for instance, took a cue from Hayden White and his analysis of tropes in nineteenth-century historical narratives to propose an interpretation of the Scandinavian Neolithic. However, it was probably anthropology that had the highest influence. Anthropologists questioned the neutrality and aloofness of ethnographic texts (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and proposed a thorough critique of the authoritarian, colonial gaze that they saw inherent to them (Rosaldo 1986). They also reinstated the self in the narrative (Rabinow 1977), with the anthropologist often appearing as yet another character in the story. Anthropology itself was inspired by historians of the Annales School, the likes of Carlo Ginzburg or Le Roy Ladurie, and the work of Hayden White. Archaeology, thus, inherited late a rhetoric that was already well seasoned in the humanities.

Experiments with narration in archaeology can be found in prehistoric (Edmonds 2002; Joyce 2002), classical (Given 2004), historical (Praetzellis 1998; Gibb 2000) and even contemporary archaeology (Byrne 2013, 2018). Although the narratives vary, they have a lot in common. In general, there is an attempt to be poetic, which is related to the fragmentary nature of the archaeological record, as Mats Burström (2013) has demonstrated. At the same time, and quite paradoxically, there is an attempt to fill the gaps and collate the fragments to produce the whole which is the story or micro-story. Despite their desire to be experimental and creative, the literary rhetoric of archaeology so far tends to adopt a representational aesthetic which is the typical of the pre-modernist or pre-avant-garde period. The idea is to construct a realist account, to tell a tale about the past: this (could have) happened in this way. For that, archaeologists adopt the position of the omniscient narrator. This happens as well when other rhetorical devices, such as non-sequential writing, multi-voicedness, or hypertextuality, are introduced (Joyce and Tringham 2007). While the narrative grows in complexity, it does not usually depart from mimetic storytelling. Very few authors have openly espoused a truly non-representational regime (Shanks 2004), or a narrative that does not intend to reconstruct the past but rather to engage with its remains in the present (Byrne 2007, 2013, 2018).

The desire to produce structured tales contradicts the fragmentariness of the archaeological record (Burström 2013), which is much better suited for the aesthetic regime of art that I have explored above. In the case of literature, the aesthetic regime is exemplified at its best in poetry, which is predicated on elisions, fragments, evocation, collage and much less in telling a story—as Yeats's dictum that poetry is not about anything, reminds us. In fact, reality is not about anything either. Hayden White (1980: 8) notes that “narrative becomes a problem only when we wish to give to real events the form of story. It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult.” He also notes that there are historiographically some genres that are non-narrative, such as annals (which completely lack a narrative component) and chronicles (that are only partially narrative). Still, even in these cases, there is something discursive about them (White 1980: 13) that is absent in much of the archaeological record. Moreover, historians and anthropologists do deal regularly with sources that have a quality of story-ness (a rite of passage narrated to an anthropologist or a medieval epic poem). The *Song of Roland* or the *Chronica Gallica* of 511 are about something in a way an early medieval house is not.

So, why have archaeologists followed the representational or mimetic regime of art and representational prose more specifically to write about the past when they try to be creative? The main reason is that they want first of all to communicate the past better, more powerfully (Van Dyke and Bernbeck 2015: 2–3). Telling tales in archaeology might serve the laudable end of popularising archaeology, but it may also squander the rhetoric potential of the discipline. It might not also be the best way to convey the realities of the contemporary era. White noted that annals and chronicles are not failed narratives, but rather faithful expressions of worldviews: they figure forth

a world in which things happen to people rather than one in which people do things. It is the hardness of the winter of 709, the hardness of the year 710 and the deficiency of the crops of that year, the flooding of the waters in 712, and the imminent presence of death which recur with a frequency and regularity that are lacking in the representation of acts of human agency.

(White 1980: 14)

We can argue that the non-narrativity of annals actually convey better the reality of the eighth century than a story. The same can be argued for our era. A tale about Auschwitz will probably fail to convey the experience of Auschwitz, as Primo Levi was painfully aware. But this, as we have seen, does not mean that Auschwitz (or the First World War or the Gulag or the bombing of Gaza) are unrepresentable: Paul Celan's poem "Todesfuge" discloses a truth about the Holocaust that is virtually non-representational and Otto Dix does the same for the First World War, in a painting, "The Trench" (1920–1923), that does not mimic reality but works with it. What we need therefore is a rhetoric that bypasses storytelling and embraces the aesthetic regime of archaeology.

This is still difficult, not only because of the implicit rhetorical complexity of such a regime for whoever is not an artist or a writer, but also for ethical and political reasons (Van Dyke and Bernbeck 2015). Storytelling is not defended as a mere issue of rhetoric. It is also an ethical and political choice. This was also pointed out by Hayden White (1980: 18), who saw storytelling intimately related to "the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine". Archaeologists want to give voice to the dispossessed, to tell their story. The more voices we have, the richer and more democratic our accounts of the past will be. This, however, meets unsurpassable obstacles in the case of archaeology. At best, we can create a plausible discourse mixing archaeological data, ethnographic analogies, historical texts and imagination. Whether this can pass for giving voice to the people of the past is debatable. It is not obvious to me that a fictionalised account better conveys the feelings, sufferings and experiences of past people better than the mute objects themselves that they created or used, without other mediation than a dry description or an image (Bernbeck 2015). Thus, the description that Gilead (2015: 248–249) offers of a bottle of Lysol found in the excavations of Sobibor concentration camp (a type of disinfectant that was also widely used as a contraceptive) speaks volumes without speaking, without telling a story, without giving voice to the victims. In fact, I am not sure either than it is "voice" that the people of the past need (considering that they need anything at all).

In my opinion, attempts at giving voice to the subaltern (human or non-human) have not been sufficiently theorised and the possibility of the Other's speech rarely problematised in depth. The notion of "subaltern" is in itself contentious. My main concern here and my



model for subalternity are cases of extreme marginalisation (victims of genocide, total war, political violence, *terra nullius* colonialism, etc.). Note also that by arguing that the Other cannot speak does not mean that I am denying that she has agency, but subaltern agency is not that which I am interested at the moment. By speech I refer to a capacity for uttering a discourse but, especially, for making this discourse heard in a way that is intelligible for those who are not in a position of subalternity. Most archaeologists and anthropologists are aware of the difficulties of the subaltern speech. Yet few have really questioned, as Gayatri Spivak has done, whether the subaltern can speak at all or whether we can hear her speaking (Spivak 1988). Instead, those archaeologists who have become aware of the epistemic violence implied in the exercise of Western science in non-Western locations have tried to put forward theoretical agendas that incorporate the viewpoints of subalterns (Atalay 2006, 2008; Haber et al. 2007). The rise of indigenous archaeologies during the last two decades is related to the necessity to overcome imperialist epistemic violence. Nevertheless, we have to start questioning whether there is a location of archaeology that is free from that violence (Gnecco 2009, 2013; Haber and Shepherd 2015). In my opinion, the issue of subalternity and representation in archaeology raises three main problems: 1) the asymmetrical and troubled nature of hybridity, 2) the impossibility of hearing the subaltern, and 3) the overwhelming role assigned to discourse.

Regarding the first point, my argument is that there is no way of escaping epistemic violence from the very moment archaeologists work with marginalised groups. Resorting to local knowledge is not, in my opinion, a way of bypassing the problem. There is no hybridity without violence. As I criticised in Chapter 3, when describing the problems of multivocality, there will be always two conflicting, asymmetrical elements in the equation: there is no possibility of harmonious coexistence, either in political or epistemological terms. As things stand at this point, the strong element—the master referent—will always be Western-style science, no matter how much we intend to hybridise it with vernacular beliefs and knowledge systems: this is why we still talk about indigenous *archaeology*, alternative *heritage*.

If I am pessimistic as to the possibilities of hybridity in science, I am no less so with regard to the ability of us hearing the subaltern (rather than her speaking). Attempts to make subalterns speak, especially through fictionalised accounts, has often ended up in ventriloquism (as criticised by Bernbeck 2015). Gayatri Spivak, talking about women in colonial India, considered that there is simply no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak (Spivak 1988: 307). Our hegemonic frame of discourse prevents the possibility of that ever occurring. She also warns us against the well-meaning attempts at making the Other speak, which paradoxically “cohere with the work of imperialist subject-constitution mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization”. We may try to make women speak, but women “will be as mute as ever” (Spivak 1988: 295). The thinker makes clear that epistemic violence is not limited to inscribing a Western discourse into the Other. The critique is more radical: there is no discourse, but Western discourse.

In her contention that the sexed, colonised subject cannot speak, Spivak’s stance is not too different from Giorgio Agamben’s with respect to the survivor of the Nazi genocide. Agamben’s witness cannot bear testimony, not because there is no location from which to utter his or her words (as in the case of the colonial subaltern), but because the word of the witness is “the sound that arises from the lacuna, the non-language that one speaks when one is alone, the non-language to which language answers, in which language is born” (Agamben 2002: 38). A “dark and maimed” language that no one understands. It is the sound articulated by Hurbinek, the young boy liberated from Auschwitz, who, Primo Levi (1963: 23–24) told



us, was only able to pronounce one word that nobody understood. If, for Spivak, there is only the discourse of hegemony, for Agamben, discourse, as such, is something that simply cannot contain the experience of the witness.

I have mentioned two problems regarding the speech of the subaltern so far: the impossibility of achieving political and epistemological symmetry, and the impossibility of a true subaltern discourse. The issue of discourse leads me to a third problem: logocentrism. I understand here *logos* in the sense of “word”. I do not make distinctions between spoken and written word, the dichotomy that has been the crux of postmodern philosophy. The essential dichotomy which concerns us here is between *logos* and *pragma*, thing or fact (Witmore 2009; Shanks and Svabo 2013). Archaeologists have the misfortune of working with *pragmata* in a world dominated, since at least classical Greek philosophy, by *logoi*. Not surprisingly in such an intellectual environment, archaeologists have eagerly entered the fight for the *logos*, neglecting *pragmata* along the way (Olsen 2003). Logocentrism, which increased with postmodernism, explains the many references to narrations, discourses, texts, stories, voices, multivocality and dialogue that have pervaded archaeological debates during the last decades. Logocentrism is very present in archaeological ethnography and heritage studies, which deal with different and often conflicting narratives, interpretations, perceptions of heritage and archaeological practice (cf. Meskell 2005; Hamilakis and Anagnostopoulos 2009). This approach is depicted as democratic, as it purportedly allows the voices of people traditionally ignored by archaeology to be heard—the communities that live beside a World Heritage site, the labourers that work in an excavation, indigenous groups claiming rights to a site. The same occurs with much of the so-called “indigenous archaeologies”, which aim, among other things, to challenge the master narrative (Atalay 2006: 294). Although I do not criticise the relevance of (and need for) archaeological ethnography, indigenous archaeologies and heritage studies in general, they are frequently, in my opinion, too logocentric and fall short of being truly radical in political terms—although there are exceptions (Hamilakis 2011). With Slavoj Žižek (2004: 190), I argue that “the struggle for liberation is *not* reducible to the ‘right to narrate’”, to the “struggle of deprived marginal groups to freely articulate their position”. Words are not enough, least of all when we are dealing with the kind of subjects that concern Spivak or Agamben.

Obviously, I do not intend to say that we can stand outside narration, as I myself am engaged in a discourse at the moment. What I think we can do is be less concerned with discourses on discourse and pay more attention to things. I would argue that despite its traditionally secondary role, things may be the path not to the subalterns’ speech, which is an unrealisable illusion, but to appraise and manifest their conditions of existence. What I espouse is an ethical detour that does not intend to penetrate the traumatic core of the Other, but perambulate the Other’s margins.

## ■ Making the mud and crops speak: an archaeological rhetoric

Spivak and Agamben coincide, as we saw, in one thing: there is an insuperable lack of *logos* in the subaltern. Philosopher Jacques Rancière adds another paradoxical dimension: there is also an excess. Although archaeologists and anthropologists have been more optimistic than Spivak and Agamben, they have recognised the gaps and absences in the speech of the Other and struggled to overcome them. However, they have been much less wary of the excess in the subalterns’ speech—an excess that, ultimately, works as a lack, since it ends up blunting and blocking the capacity of the Other to make her or him heard. Actually, the excess of *logos* that Rancière detects is based on a previous silence. “The poor”—writes Rancière

are those that speak blindly, on the level of the event, because the very fact of speaking is an event for them. They are those who are furious to write, to speak of others and to talk about themselves. Fury is the common failing of those who do what they have no place to do. The poor speak falsely because they have no place to speak.

(Rancière 1992: 41)

Rancière agrees with Spivak, then: there is no location for the logos of the subaltern.

But it is not that there is an absence of talk, what happens is that by speaking from a non-place, their discourse is “blind”. The sound from the non-place of the subaltern, then, is a “mute shout” (Spivak) or a “background noise” (Agamben). There is an important nuance that is lost in the English translation of Rancière (1994), though. What I translate as “fury”, the English translator renders as “eagerness”. Yet Rancière writes that the poor, *se sont acharnés à écrire*, which is not just “being eager to write”. *S’acharner* means “to fight fiercely” and *char*, the word upon which *acharner* is built, means “meat”. There is something material, crude and violent in the subaltern’s speech. An excess of furious energy and an excess of life, warns Rancière (1992: 50), produces death. The discourse of the subaltern is “a blinded, blinding word” (ibid.: 53).

History, argues the philosopher, as any legitimate social science, has to regulate the excessive life of the subaltern and, according to him, “The era of history is the one in which historians have invented a conceptual and narrative system suitable to neutralize the excess of words.” (Rancière 1992: 87). But in what sense is the subaltern logos excessive, “blinded and blinding”? Rancière explains it by resorting to the *History of the French Revolution* written by the nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet. Michelet refers in his work to the documents from the period of the Revolution produced by common people, with their complaints about the injustices of the *Ancien Régime*. However, Michelet does not write about the content itself, because the letters and memoranda, argues Rancière, are like letters of inexperienced lovers, they “repeat stereotypes, sentences from novels, letters of love copied to others”. The logos of the subaltern is a borrowed discourse, an assemblage of platitudes: pure mimesis. It cannot be otherwise, because the subaltern does not have a proper location from which to speak. The subaltern can only speak from a borrowed location. What Michelet does, according to Rancière, is finding a third way, between the aristocratic rhetoric that conceals the letters and that of the ventriloquist who translates the content and replaces the subaltern voice.

Michelet’s third way is a detour. First, he shows the letters, gives testimony of their existence, and says what the letters say—not their content, but the potency that forced people to write them, that is expressed in them. Then Michelet returns the letters to the archive and replaces them for a tale—a tale of the Festival. The peasant festival in its essence: the field in the time of harvest, the gathering of people, the white dresses of the young women of the Revolution:

By substituting the prolix writing of the village scholars by this picture of a silent people, Michelet invents a new solution for the excess of words . . . He invents the art of making the poor speak by making them silent, making them speak as mute people.

(Rancière 1992: 101–102)

The historian, argues Rancière, transforms what is said into something visible and this visible shows the sense of what the word could not express. The historian’s task is to drive the subaltern’s word to silence, so that the mute voice that is expressed in the word can speak.

We are now coming near the realm of archaeology, as we move away from the uttering of the logos and approach the manifestation of being. And this manifestation grows in materiality in the next example proposed by Jacques Rancière. The best instance of Michelet's third way, according to the philosopher, is his depiction of the revolutionary Joseph Chalier, from whose discourses the historian does not provide a single word. Michelet writes:

this clown is not a man. It is a city, an ill world, is the furious complaint of Lyon. The deep mud of the black streets, silent since the beginning of time, is heard through him. Through him start to speak the ancient darkness, the damp, dismal houses ashamed of the day, hunger and the elderly women, the abandoned child, the sullied woman, so many trodden generations . . . all this is called Chalier.

(Rancière 1992: 99)

This rhetorical detour destroys the primacy of mimesis and this destruction does not just neutralise the lethal excess of the subaltern logos, it also neutralises the “appearance of the past”—it makes the past present in all its relevance.

“By making the mud and crops speak”, writes Rancière, “instead of orators and village writers, the political reign of the people is rooted in its place” (Rancière 1992: 107). The material discourse of mud and crops is the discourse of “that which does not have the habit to talk, a discourse of places and things” (ibid.: 115). What Rancière is suggesting, therefore, is a material detour around the voice of the subaltern, a detour that “gives body” (*donne corps*) to the place of the people, and we may add, to the people themselves. By bypassing the furious (*acharné*) word of the subaltern, then, we do not remove her flesh, but her absence of flesh. And the flesh that is given back is not the raw meat (*char*) of the *acharnement*, but the solid flesh of the political. As Tabish Khair reminds, the subaltern may not be able to speak, but the subaltern has a body that is not reducible to discourse, a body whose materiality in fact derails discourse and exceeds subalternity for its mere being there (Khair 2000: 14–15). This material body of resistance is not the active, performative body that Judith Butler (1993) envisages, but a more unconscious substance and it is this unconscious nature which precisely makes it such a formidable weapon of resistance. As Mbembe notes:

Breaking with the uprootedness and the pure world of things of which he or she is but a fragment, the slave is able to demonstrate the protean capabilities of the human bond through music and *the very body* that was supposedly possessed by another.

(Mbembe 2003: 22; added emphasis)

“Only speaks truly that which is mute”, concludes Rancière (1992: 119). And what is mute is what he calls “material civilisation”: the world of objects and tools, daily practices, uses of the body, symbolic behaviour—the regularities, in sum, of material life. And who is in a better position to deal with material life than archaeologists (Olsen et al. 2012)? What we have so often considered our curse—the lack of words—turns out to be our greatest asset, not just in epistemological terms, but in ethical and political ones as well. The only problem is that we have forgotten silence. We have tried to fill the silence of the subaltern with words, which resulted in mimesis and cacophony. We tried to avoid the imposed detour of the material, which asks for silence, and went directly to the traumatic core of the subaltern. We should have heard Martin Heidegger, who insisted on the importance of detours: “Man”—said Heidegger (1978: 222)—“is the neighbor of Being”. We have to dwell “in the nearness of Being”. Not in the middle, because we cannot break open into the House of Being. “Everything depends upon this alone”—reminds the philosopher

that the truth of Being come to language and that thinking attain to this language. Perhaps, then, language requires much less precipitous expression than proper silence. But who of us today would want to imagine that his attempts to think are at home on the path of silence?

(Heidegger 1978: 223)

We archaeologists, who work with mute things of mute people—not mute because they are dead, but because they have no location from which to talk—we, of all scholars, could have imagined that our attempts to think had to be on the path of silence.

How to make the mud and crops speak their silent language then? We do not have to look far to find a rhetoric for archaeology. What we should do is use the aesthetic resources of the things themselves and of the discipline. An archaeological poetics of the contemporary past, either visual or verbal, tries to capture the manifold experiences of our era and particularly of those who have been silenced, who have no place from where to speak. For that, it works with things, explores their evocative, affective character and is based on parataxis, anaphora, ellipsis and dry description. Anything that “allows the thingness of things to glow in the dark” (Taussing 2004: x), not for the sake of things qua things, but for the people who live with them, who live by them. I would like to finish this chapter with two short experiments in archaeological poetics.

### *We are not afraid of ruins*



We arrive at dusk, with a light that turns the rock red and the mud bricks of the houses even redder. The village—half a dozen buildings—is several kilometres away from any inhabited place. It can only be reached through a dirt track.

All the houses are empty, except one, which is used as a warehouse. The rest have been gradually abandoned. Nobody has come here in twenty years. The last date is provided by a newspaper stapled onto a wall: 1995. In the houses we found ramshackle furniture of sixty or seventy years ago, clothes only slightly more recent, bottles, chairs, old or ancient tools (difficult to decide).



What remains is the portrait of a life: of Aragonese peasants during the first half of the twentieth century. Their homes are very small, very simple. The lower story is used as a stable; the upper story has a single room that combines the functions of kitchen and bedroom. The windows are tiny, so that neither cold nor heat can penetrate the building in this land of extreme seasons. The light does not enter either: only the thin red ray of sunset. One can imagine easily a large family here—mother, father, several children—crowded in this room of ten square metres, sharing meals and sweat. From the stable would ascend the warm smell of animals and the stench of manure—an extended family in their earth house.

This could be any of the many villages abandoned in Aragon, if it were not for a detail: one of the houses is all written over. A group of anarchists left evidence of their presence here during the Spanish Civil War. They wrote or scratched the whitewashed walls with a pencil or an awl. We read CNT (National Confederation of Labour), UHP (Union of Proletarian Brothers), “Comrade, if you know when you will be coming . . .”, “Compañeros”, “Barcelona”. A list of names: Eugenio, Andreu, Iriarte, Carbajal, Sánchez. There are no slogans in the house. Except acronyms, many, as if they were a magic spell. Like the crosses in peasant houses protecting their inhabitants from the evil eye or witches. A way of feeling safe in a world that is falling apart.



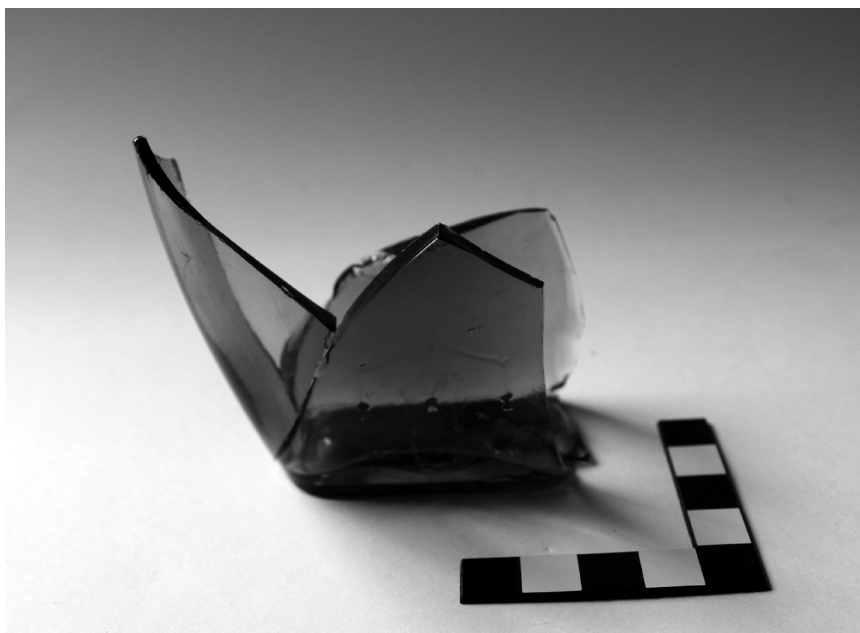
There is also an exceptional picture: a half-body portrait of Buenaventura Durruti. It is a copy of a famous photograph of this legendary anarchist leader with his trademark hat. Durruti spent time on the Aragon frontline, perhaps with these same men that now remember him. Around the head, forming an arch, the author of the drawing wrote his own name: “Draughtsman Artist Roca Muñoz”, only that “draughtsman” is misspelled (*dibugante*). Above we read “Comrade Durruti” and perhaps “your memory”. In the lower left corner, there is another portrait, the unfinished draft of a head. There is a date on the opposite wall that sets in time and in History the anarchist occupation of this village: 22 March (of 1937). Durruti had been killed in the Battle of Madrid four months before, on 20 November 1936.

“We are not afraid of ruins”, said Durruti once. And here is his portrait in ruins, in a house in ruins, in a landscape in ruins. “Because we carry a new world in our hearts.”



*A bottle of perfume*

In the desert of Mediana, the Republican and Nationalist parapets are so close that they almost touch. If they don't, it is because between them lies a narrow strip of craters and shrapnel. In every inch of land, we found a fragment of twisted iron or a bullet. Or a bomb. In between the trenches we also found a broken purple bottle which somebody threw from a trench. It is not the typical glass of wine or anisette. When we paste together the fragments, we realize that it is a perfume bottle.



An object out of place that carried inside a smell out of place.

American Brigadier Alvah Bessie also thought that perfume was a misplaced thing in a war. He tells of very young soldiers in Alicante, on the Mediterranean coast, in May 1938, the war about to be lost. They came with mirrors and stinking soap and talcum powder and “the inevitable bottles of perfume, without which a Spanish soldier feels incapable of facing the enemy, even in frontline trenches”.

Yet a bottle of perfume in the frontline might not be so absurd. Because war does not smell like gunpowder and Picric acid only. It also smells like the corpse of a friend or an enemy rotting under August sun in the desert of Mediana, two metres away from where you are, in a ditch with rubbish, shit, blood and vomit.

And then perfume, like wine and bullets, becomes a trench tool.

## ■ Summary

A concern with aesthetics, and more specifically with art, has been typical of contemporary archaeology since its rebirth in the early twenty-first century. Rather than seeking inspiration in the work of artists, however, what I have tried to do in this chapter is to explore the similarities of the aesthetic regime of art (*sensu* Rancière) and archaeology. I have argued that they coincide both in their concern with manifesting things that cannot be expressed through the conventional language of representative art and in the central place accorded to parataxis, “a great indifferent mixture of significations and materialities” (Rancière). Yet if contemporary art *creates* parataxes, archaeology *finds* them. The apparently absurd combinations of things that turn up at any site of the recent past can be considered paratactic manifestations of the true nature of our era, in which diverse temporalities, materialities and forms of being collide or coalesce.

Another crucial point where contemporary art and archaeology coincide is in the redistribution of the sensible in which both engage. Following Jacques Rancière, I believe that archaeology, like art, makes possible an “epiphany of the visible” that has a radical political edge. By paying attention to subaltern lives and materialities, archaeology rearranges the sensible world and abolishes all hierarchies of value: a rusty tin can in a homeless shelter is of no less importance than a building designed by a famous architect.

Archaeological aesthetics become political by revaluing humble materialities and marginalised lives, but also through the staging of the demos. This is most clearly seen in grass-roots initiatives seeking to exhume traumatic memories: the so-called recovery of historical memory in places like Argentina, Spain, or Germany, and that have exposed the work of political violence while at the same time bringing back from darkness, in full view, the victims of such violence. Finally, manifesting the contemporary era requires a particular aesthetical expression. I have proposed some theoretical elements to ground an archaeological aesthetics, one that tries to avoid ventriloquising the Other and instead focuses on the material world. It is a poetics of knowledge that attempts to make “the mud and crops speak”.

# 6

## Time

**T**HE FINAL THREE chapters of this book will be devoted to the temporal, spatial and material excess of supermodernity.<sup>1</sup> Time excess can be said to comprise all the rest because, as Agamben has argued:

Every culture is first and foremost a particular experience of time, and no new culture is possible without an alteration in this experience. The original task of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely to “change the world”, but also—and above all—to “change time”.

(Agamben 1993: 91)

The main characteristic of the new time of modernity, and particularly supermodernity, is velocity: “the history of capitalism”, writes David Harvey (1989: 240), “has been characterised by speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world sometimes seems to collapse inwards upon us.” Yet the problem is not simply that time is accelerated. As Jean Améry remarked (see Chapter 4), it is also twisted. “The time is out of joint”, agrees Jacques Derrida, quoting Hamlet’s words: “Time is disarticulated, dislocated, dislodged, time is run down, on the run and run down, deranged, both out of order and mad. Time is off its hinges, time is off course, beside itself, disadjusted” (Derrida 2006: 20). This is perhaps a more eloquent way of describing the state of time in supermodernity than the usual idea of “quick time” or time-space compression (Virilio 1986; Harvey 1989; Augé 2002 [1992]; Sewell 2008). Because it is not only that things go faster or that there is a factual excess. It is also, more precisely, that time is out of joint, which is also saying that time is both unjust and anachronistic (Derrida 2006: 25). The philosopher, then, links temporality and morality, both of which are put into crisis by our era. It is probably this feeling that has led archaeologists to focus on alternative, heterogeneous and non-linear temporalities (Witmore 2007b; Olivier 2008; Hamilakis 2011), which are also a matter of concern in other fields (De Landa 1997). In fact, the contemporary era is one of multiple temporalities (Dawdy 2016) which are progressively being erased and uniformised. Homogenisation, however, is yet far from achieved. In this chapter, I will characterise the time of supermodernity through its archaeological traces. For that, I will explore four phenomena: presentism, time annihilation, acceleration and heterochrony. The chapter will end with a reflection on the nature of the temporality of contemporary archaeology and how it can be used to produce richer and more effective accounts of the recent past.

### Presentism

Along with speed and disjointedness, another characteristic of the temporal excess of the contemporary era is presentism. Supermodern time perpetually abolishes itself in a continuous

celebration of the present. For supermodern societies, there is no past or future—only the instant (Bauman 2000: 125). Presentism, “the reign of a perpetual present” (Connerton 2009: 88), is the excess, even the tyranny, of the now, over all other times (Baschet 2018). We could even speak of an “ideology of the present” (Augé 2008: 93–94). François Hartog (2005: 14) sees this as the result of the politics of time in the twentieth century, the era that “has most invoked the future, that has most constructed and massacred in its name” and also the era that has given more importance to the present: “a massive, overwhelming, omnipresent present, that has no horizon other than itself, daily creating the past and the future that, day after day, it needs”. Even the materiality of our era is present-oriented. This is perhaps best seen in plastic (Hawkins 2018): plastic is presentist because its materiality refuses the inscription of time; because its ephemerality and disposability means that the only important time is now; because being purely synthetic, we ignore its past (its conditions of production), and because it leads us to forget how to make things with other materials, which it replaces (Millán Pascual 2015). Plastic is directly involved in the “impoverishment of experience” lamented by Walter Benjamin and that affects our ability to make and feel. Not only plastic, but much of the materiality of our world is presentist: Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa regrets the prevalence of similar qualities in modern architecture, which has privileged those elements that produce “flatness, immaterial abstractness and timelessness” (Pallasmaa 2000: 79).

Archaeology’s recent concern with the present (González-Ruibal 2006a; Harrison 2011) can be considered a symptom of the age in which we are living. This has not only epistemic effects (in determining what is relevant for investigation), but also sociopolitical ones: the growing relevance of applied forms of archaeology (usable pasts, community archaeology, cultural heritage) can be linked to a social “demand of immediacy” (Troadec 2014). This is not unique of the discipline, the rise of “solution-oriented research agendas” that have no place for the deep past has been criticised by historians of Africa, for instance (Reid 2011: 152–153). Society cannot wait for the positive effects of archaeology—or any other science for that matter—to be experienced in the long term: the only temporality of benefit that is acceptable is the now, thus replicating the short cycles of return of the most profitable capitalist ventures (Cunningham and MacEachern 2016).

We have therefore to be cautious with the chronopolitics that we espouse in our practice (Witmore 2013). The current interest in the future among archaeologists and heritage students (Holtorf and Hogberg 2015; Harrison 2016; McAtackney and Penrose 2016: 153–154; Harrison et al. 2016) is, in fact, very much related to the temporal malaise of the present. Améry (1980) had already complained in the 1960s that the future was regarded then as containing intrinsic value: what will be tomorrow has more value than what was yesterday. Against this, we, as archaeologists, should remind society that the future, as Derrida (2006: 45) writes, “can only be for ghosts and the past”. Indeed, the celebration of the future, as Améry noted, often comes with a plea for oblivion, of the sins of a dictatorial past or of capitalism’s misdeeds (Connerton 2009). Refusing to know the future may be a form of resistance to the prevailing temporal regime of capitalism. Archaeology is sometimes seen as useless for its dealing with the past. But to be useless can be a means of rejecting the demands of the capitalist system to participate in the “colonisation of the future”. This is a concept coined by Anthony Giddens, who has argued that controlling the future has become one of the trademarks of social experience in late modernity. In a situation where alternative options are more and more abundant, strategic life-planning has achieved greater relevance (Giddens 1991: 85). What is true for each of us, is also true for us as collectives: modern societies tend to plan more and organise time more thoroughly. Life-planning is as much about preparing for the future as about

reinterpreting the past. Giddens (1991: 86) considers life-planning as part of a more general colonisation of the future. According to the sociologist, the future is recognised in modernity to be intrinsically unknowable, and as it is increasingly severed from the past, “it becomes a new terrain—a territory of counterfactual possibility. Once thus established, that terrain lends itself to colonial invasion through counterfactual thought and risk calculation” (Giddens 1991: 111). Heritage management is a perfect example of the strategies developed by late modern societies to colonise the future. In its more conventional manifestation, it is an attempt at reversing entropy, freezing time and averting loss (see critique in Holtorf 2015), thus making the future exactly as the present is—and therefore knowable and under control.

Rather than celebrate the present and the future per se as open spaces for experimentation, I believe that we need to develop other chronopolitics, which should revolve around the idea of the deep present. This means three things: on the one hand, it refers to unravelling the spatial ramifications and political genealogies of the now. Living the instant, with a total disregard for sustainability in the long term, requires an intensified predation with obvious social and ecological consequences. Taking a deep-present perspective means re-establishing the geographical and political connections between instant consumption and long-term patterns of global depredation (what I called “descent” in Chapter 3). After all, most commodities that are consumed in the developed world have been coming from the same places of predation since the late fifteenth century.

The deep present also refers to history. It refers to retracing the steps of *ta archaia*, the old things, that have been forgotten in the age of supermodernity (Witmore 2013): every *topos* where past and present touch, every artefact from the past that has an impact in the present, that may even determine it—a Hellenistic wall in a modern village, a Roman road. This is an approach that has been powerfully espoused by Laurent Olivier (2008) and Christopher Witmore (2006, 2007b, 2013, 2014), to which the earlier work of Gérard Chouquer (2000) has to be added. Instead of flat surfaces with a thin history, these authors think in terms of topologies—complex, convoluted surfaces where multiple pasts and the present enter into contact in manifold ways. In fact, unlike historians, archaeologists regularly find traces of other periods when investigating the recent. They might cleanse them out in their accounts, but they are forced to reckon with their existence and document them. What we have to do is actively incorporate these other pasts into our narratives of the supermodern. While conducting research on the remains of the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship, I have found fragments of older worlds—an Iron Age fibula, Roman pottery, a medieval deserted village—that have forced me to look at the recent past differently. The Spanish Civil War would have been extremely different if the soldiers had not enrolled eighteenth-century sheepfolds and Iron Age hillforts in the conflict. These elements determined military tactics, shaped the war landscape and strongly influenced perceptions and experiences, yet they have been seldom taken into account by historians (González-Ruibal 2016a). In different ways, all pasts become contemporary and therefore part of the archaeology of the present: their remnants create new constellations that simultaneously illuminate forgotten aspects of our era and of the remote past.

History, however, can be taken into account in other ways, not so much through frictions between moments in time, but by looking at the long term, instead of stopping at the gates of the contemporary era. As has been noted by historian Richard Reid (2011), presentisms hamper a proper understanding of the present, which can only be appraised by taking into account sometimes very old trajectories and genealogies: the absurd proliferation of pillboxes in communist Albania can only be adequately understood if we take into account a very long history of invasions endured by that country since Antiquity and that have left an



eloquent material record (Eaton and Roshi 2014). Against the presentist tide, some research is being carried out from a perspective that seeks to understand the contemporary but overflows the limits of the twentieth century, thus abolishing the divide between contemporary, historical and sometimes prehistoric archaeology. Examples of such an approach are the works of Shannon Lee Dawdy in New Orleans (Dawdy 2010, 2016), François Richard in Senegal (Richard 2011, 2015a, 2015b), José María López-Mazz in Uruguay (López-Mazz 2015b), María Cruz-Berrocal et al. (2017) in Taiwan and Scott McEachern (2018) in Cameroon and Nigeria. This approach is particularly necessary in colonial and postcolonial contexts, where the twentieth century often overwhelms all other periods and blinds us to the complex genealogies of the present (Reid 2011; González-Ruibal 2015).

Finally, the deep present refers to the multiple pasts and the multiple temporalities that exist in our time. The present is often imagined as solely modern. But modernity is just a temporality among many in the world today. There are other historicities and temporal rhythms. They have been losing terrain under the modern avalanche. But they still exist and resist. Archaeologists working on the recent past have to be, even more than other practitioners, ready to appraise non-linear time to make sense of a world where time is deranged. They have to revalue other temporalities, those of subaltern and nonmodern communities, which still survive in the interstices of the supermodern world. They have to make visible these slower, bodily temporalities, as a way to challenge the disarticulated ephemerality of supermodern time. A good way of reclaiming other temporal regimes is showing its persistence in the present, the time of objects that anchor time, instead of disintegrating it: the time of immutable things, which has been forgotten (González-Ruibal 2014). Think of a knife, an axe, or a stone wall. They seldom attract the attention of students of material culture (but see Olsen 2003, 2010), who are fascinated by new technologies and fashion. An archaeology of the supermodern era does not only study what is new and changing, it should also vindicate the subaltern artefact that resists the annihilation of time: the humble, elementary object (Olivier 2008: 288).

## Annihilation

The annihilation of time is one of the main characteristics of the supermodern era. This is nowhere better seen than in the supermodern metropolis—the post-mnemonic artefact par excellence (Connerton 2009). The metaphor of the multilayered city used by Sigmund Freud to compare human memories and material memories is less and less true. Freud argued that the material memory of historical cities was faulty and fragmentary, due to continuous processes of demolition and reconstruction. Still, the debris of the past enabled the reconstruction of their history. Even spaces that had been constructed and reconstructed repeatedly for centuries never lost their memory entirely. They were not hollowed out to geological levels, as happens today. Consider the case of the Palatine Hill and the Forum in Rome. Here, there are remains going back to the seventh century BC (Carandini 2007). The hill and the plain were Rome's seat of power for several centuries. Aristocrats and emperors built palaces and villas side by side and one on top of the other; public buildings, shrines and temples replaced each other century after century. Yet the memory of the early, prehistoric occupations remained in the material traces of primitive huts and walls and in the collective remembrance of the Romans. Both were tightly linked: the vestiges of the past that emerged from the soil each time a new building was erected illuminated the present with past memories. Myths were updated. Some remains were even curated, like the purported house of Romulus in the Palatine, in

**FIGURE 6.1** The abolition of time by the totalitarian building: the construction of the City of Culture in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, by Peter Eisenman has hollowed out a hill down to the bedrock so as to impose itself in the landscape. Author's photograph.



all likelihood the remains of an Iron Age hut. Today, every time a building is built, chronometres are set at zero, as with messianic and totalitarian movements (Zerubavel 2003: 91). Supermodern architecture has an absolutist drive. Wittingly or unwittingly, it aims to abolish the past. It works against sedimentation and history. Supermodern buildings are themselves their only reference (Augé 2008). They create amnesic spaces, devoid of all past, impervious to otherness. By stripping all layers to the bedrock, modern buildings prevent further encounters with the past, further surprises (Figure 6.1). The past starts with them and, being mostly unmodifiable (unlike organic premodern structures), the future ends with them too.

The accelerating pace of construction, demolition and reconstruction characteristic of the supermodern city was already obvious in late nineteenth-century New York, when “buildings no longer followed a traditional life cycle—ripening gradually from gestation through maturity to old age—but rather the artificial, accelerated, and unpredictable cycles of speculative real estate” (Yablon 2009: 255). Metropolises all over the world are now regularly stripped of their past, buildings hollowed out and their external walls preserved in a sort of pseudo-historical pastiche that has been named “façadism”. Examples abound in many capitals all over the world, especially in those places where heritage laws are less strong, the pressure of capital greater or both: Santiago de Chile, Buenos Aires, or Madrid offer excellent examples of the annihilation of time in the name of a crudely capitalist conception of “heritage”. Sometimes reconstruction after war is used as an excuse to further annihilate history. In Beirut, house exteriors were carefully restored after the civil war but only to become “stone shells”, which offer a metaphor for Beirut’s reconstruction: “expansive new urbanist façades, social masks and political clothes, empty of substance” (Charlesworth and Nelson 2012: 244).

**FIGURE 6.2** São Paulo: the omnipresent present. Photograph by Ana Mayorgas.

In other cases, not even façades are preserved: the fantasy of a blank slate where one could build a modernist utopia has led to the razing of historical buildings from Indianapolis to Tehran (Mullins 2017; Mehan 2017). “The past is not behind us . . . it is in front of us, with us”, writes Laurent Olivier (2008: 30). Yet this is not always the case. It is less and less so. The past, at least the past that refers to something beyond the age of supermodernity, is less and less easy to find in cosmopolises like São Paulo or Shanghai (Figure 6.2) or in regions where economic developments have cleansed the land of all archaeological sites. Everywhere, a new heritage of the present or the future (skyscrapers, monuments, airports) replaces a past that is considered redundant—a burden, shameful, politically destabilising, unnecessary, or simply provincial. In its refusal to let the past be simply annihilated, without witnesses and without punishment, archaeology may become a weapon of resistance that slows down time and reminds us that another world was (and therefore is) possible.

Archaeologists themselves are often involved in the annihilation of time. In their desire to produce coherent, synchronous times, as in conventional archaeological phases, we unwittingly deny alternative temporalities and temporal mixtures the possibility to exist. One of the most terrible consequences of this is the eviction of communities that live in or beside ancient monuments, whose time is regarded as out of synch with that of the archaeological remains. This was the case with the Nubian houses built amidst Pharaonic tombs of the Valley of the Kings in Qurna. The houses were destroyed and their inhabitants displaced to make room for a pure, ancient time that could be enjoyed by tourists (Witmore 2013: 132–133). In other cases, a difference is established between the old and the ancient: the old is equated with filth (and the lower classes) and thus eliminated to make room for modern buildings and infrastructures, whereas monuments (not old, but ancient) are preserved (Herzfeld 2006). Monuments from the past and from the present are at least synchronised in their political purposes: they share a similar temporality, if not time. Interestingly, poor Thais living in old houses in Bangkok relabel them as “ancient” to protect them from demolition (Herzfeld 2006: 139–140).

The supermodern era, however, annihilates time in more brutal ways. Perhaps where obliteration is most clearly seen is in the work of totalitarian politics. Totalitarianism inaugurates a new temporality, which is oriented towards an indefinite future (Arendt 2004: 430–431, 503), resets historical chronometers at zero (Zerubavel 2003: 91), and seeks to radically destroy the time of its enemies by negating them their present, their future, and even their past. With gas chambers and crematoria, the Nazi regime used technology to attempt to “erase people without leaving any trace, as if they had never existed” (Arendt 2004: 528). The same logic of temporal annihilation is behind strategies of ethnic cleansing that have been seen in the former Yugoslavia, and that targeted people, things and documents (Chapman 1994). The destruction of libraries, a true annihilation of historical time, can be considered more than the cleansing of a specific cultural history (Riedlmayer 1995). The production of *desaparecidos* in Argentina had the same overall purpose as the Nazi genocides (Colombo 2011; Company et al. 2011; Zarankin et al. 2012; Rosignoli 2015). Political dissidents were assassinated by the dictatorship and their bodies blown up, thrown into the high seas, burned, or buried in unmarked graves (Calveiro 2008: 164). A constellation of camps was established throughout the country as a technology not simply of extermination, but of disappearance (Colombo 2011). As Calveiro (2008: 163) aptly puts it the regime made “the disappeared disappear”.

The double annihilation that implies the destruction of graves and bodies has been attested in many other places, including in the Eastern Front during the Second World War (Sturdy Colls 2015), Spain (Muñoz Encinar 2016), Uruguay (López Mazz 2015a, 2015b) and the former Yugoslavia (Skinner et al. 2002). Apart from people and their bodies, erasure from history may affect houses, villages and entire landscapes. In Rwanda, *génocidaires* assassinated people and then demolished their houses to claim their land as empty (Giblin 2015: 136): a land without a past and therefore without guilt. In 1923, the ethnic cleansing that targeted the Greeks of Western Turkey deleted a deep history going several millennia back in time (Bevan 2006: 25–60). Likewise, the Nazis killed all the male population of Lidice in the Czech Republic and razed the village to the ground as a way not only of annihilating the present and the future, but also the Czech past (Stehlik 2004). However, by excavating the ruins and exposing the fragments of broken lives, archaeology can redress this operation of total temporal erasure (Stehlik 2004: 80–98). In fact, the discipline has the methodological tools not only to expose the annihilation of the present and the future (as human remains inside mass graves), but also the annihilation of the past—that is, the erasure of the traces of annihilation—through taphonomic and stratigraphic analyses (Skinner et al. 2002; López Mazz 2015a).



The same can be said of the systematic dismantling of concentration and extermination camps as archaeological surveys and excavations have retrieved evidence of the process of genocidal killings even in those places where evidence-cleansing was carried out in a large scale (Gilead et al. 2010; Sturdy Colls 2012). Few things can be erased forever.

The dream of the legible, controllable and homogenous nation-state (Scott 1998) has come close to be materialised in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in places like Eastern Europe or Israel. In the latter case, ethnic cleansing has adopted a clear spatial logic (Falah 1996; Hanafi 2009). Authors have talked of spatio-cide, place annihilation and spatial annihilation to refer to the policies of dislocation of the Palestinian population and the transformation of their cultural landscape. Yet we could also talk of a chronocide, because the purpose is also to annihilate all dissonant histories and temporalities and enforce a singular line of historical descent (Abu El-Haj 2001).

## ■ Acceleration

There exists a common agreement that the time of supermodernity is one of acceleration, which provokes the collapse of space and time (Harvey 1989: 284–307). Paul Virilio (1986) has even coined a concept to describe a new “science of velocity”, “dromology”, that would investigate our existence at the speed of light and the political economy underpinned by it. Accelerated time has an obvious material signature. Programmed obsolescence is perhaps one of the most popular. Ephemerality, more generally (to which I will refer in the next chapter) is another one. Material acceleration, however, should not be associated only with artefacts (be they smartphones or freeways). Acceleration affects also living beings, which are subjected to increasing manipulation by humans. Consider the case of the eucalyptus (Doughty 2000). A native Australian genus, its international expansion began at the threshold of supermodernity, which is not a coincidence. It spread during the first phase of globalisation driven by the Age of Imperialism and today occupies many countries, but is particularly present in former colonised territories (such as Africa, South Asia and South America). The eucalyptus is a supermodern artefact in many senses: it grows in highly degraded land, of the kind that has been subjected to extreme capitalist exploitation, for instance; it is planted as a monocrop that quickly impoverishes local ecosystems, and it is the epitome of cheap nature (Moore 2016). Its extremely fast growth quickens the pace of profit: the trees can be cut every five to ten years. In many parts of the world, accelerated eucalyptus plantations are superseding the slower landscapes of old-growth forests.

While acceleration is generally regarded as a negative outcome of supermodern technologies and related to war and capitalism (Harvey 1989; Virilio 2002; Connerton 2009: 109–117), mobility—most recently recast as nomadism—is praised, even romanticised, by philosophers, artists and social thinkers alike (Deleuze and Guattari 1986; Clifford 1997; Braidotti 2013; Careri 2013). Yet, acceleration and mobility are inseparable in the modern world, and they are both feasible thanks to modern technologies of real and virtual displacement. Both are predicated on a specific political economy that creates socioeconomic inequalities (Friedman 2002; Cresswell 2006, 2010). Virilio (1994: 22) saw a divide between “those who are territorialized and those who tend ceaselessly to dissipate in their conquest of elemental totality, in pure spatiality: sea, sky, and empty space”. Freedom of movement and fast movement are for the cosmopolitan middle and upper classes and the materiality of speed diverges from one class and race to the other, as does the speed itself. The temporality



of the poor and the temporality of the rich, thus, differ, and so do their technologies of movement (Cresswell 2010: 163–164). Time accelerates, but not for everybody, or not at the same pace. Thus, Dimitris Dalakoglou (2016: 9–10) notes that modern roads, in both colonial and metropolitan contexts, such as Albania, Portugal, or colonial Africa, have been built by those who had no access to automobility and its symbolic and practical benefits. In this way, the road becomes an artefact of class distinction that visibilises the asymmetric access to speed by different groups of people. Yet there are others who prefer to not move also. Those who attach themselves to a place are denounced as partisans of archaism and enemies of Progress (Friedman 2002; Baschet 2018: 64).

From an archaeological point of view, slowness of movement favours another kind of material phenomena, much less monumental than airports or highways, but paradoxically more conducive to generate archaeological record rapidly. This is because slow movement favours sedimentation. So, while the specific journey of an executive flying from Mexico DF to San Francisco leaves little or no archaeological trace (at least *in situ*), the presence of emigrants walking across the desert can be documented archaeologically and specific events and individual experiences can be registered (Gokee and De León 2014; De León 2015) (Figure 6.3). The same happens with poor migrants and refugees elsewhere. People from the Near East, Central Asia and Africa who tried to enter Europe through Finland or Norway in 2015–2016 ended their journeys in old cars bought in Russia that were abandoned in the border (Seitsonen et al. 2016). The archaeological here is twofold: it lies in the dense material traces of the journey (which includes the cars and many personal belongings abandoned in them), but also in the long biographies of the vehicles, which are true archaeological artefacts. One of the Ladas had been imported to Finland from the Soviet Union in the 1980s, then transported back to Russia after the collapse of communism and finally driven to Finland by the refugees (Seitsonen et al. 2016: 247). Yet perhaps the asymmetries of acceleration is nowhere better seen than in southern Brazil. For the Guarani people, walking has always been an essential part of their culture (Pradella 2009). After being evicted from their lands by the dominant society, they now wander along modern roads and establish their camps along roadsides, in what amounts to a deeply troubling form of resistance. They make fragile places out of the non-places of supermodernity.

Archaeology provides eloquent testimony of the speeded-up pace of our era brought about by new technologies. The epitome of modernity and its revolutionary spatio-temporal effects was, for a very long time, the train and later the automobile. Trains figure in the Communist Manifesto—and in Marx's work more generally—as an index of temporal acceleration of historical processes and of the expansion of capitalism (Marx and Engels 1967 [1848]). Their role in transforming the world in economic, social and cultural terms cannot be underestimated: railway networks accelerated the circulation of commodities, stabilised time zones, reinforced class distinctions, fostered mobility, encouraged urbanisation, extended the frontiers of colonial nations and contributed to the consolidation and uniformisation of the nation-state (Carter 2001: 8–11; Ferrari 2006: 4–5). As a herald and a tool of globalisation, railways became the first world artefact, almost identical from one end of the Earth to the other. When they failed and were abandoned, their ruins were (are) seen as a metaphor of a failed modernity (Hardman 1988), or proof of its autophagic nature, which sends wave after wave of progress and destruction (Gordillo 2014: 178–181).

Yet conventional railways are abandoned and ruined in large parts of the world today. They were fast enough for modernity, but not for supermodernity. In the United Kingdom, the process started in 1963 and resulted in 5,000 miles of line axed and 2,318 rural stations on retained lines closed (Penrose 2007: 60). Argentina, Brazil and Chile have seen large part of

**FIGURE 6.3** The slow time of poor migrants: a migrant station in the Sonoran Desert, Arizona, 2009. This accumulation of materials likely represents a final resting point for migrants who have walked dozens of miles across the desert. Photograph by Michael Wells, Undocumented Migration Project (De León 2015).



their systems fall out of use and transformed into heritage (Ferrari 2006; Lanuza 2008; Cano Sanchís 2015) (Figure 6.4). This is quite ironic: a tool for bringing acceleration transformed into one designed to stop time. The ruins of old railways and related infrastructures reveal, in a way that perhaps was not so obvious then, the slow temporalities that coexisted with the general acceleration of time. Thus, the new infrastructures, which were labour intensive

**FIGURE 6.4** Fast enough for modernity, but not for supermodernity: the art deco railway station of Goiânia, Brazil, inaugurated in 1950 and abandoned in the 1980s. Author's photograph.



(Cuéllar et al. 2003), created new links and forms of dependence between people and things (Hodder 2012). Early railways, like early modern roads, were not yet places of mere transit—non-places. The infrastructures that facilitated acceleration and globalisation were at the same time heavy material nodes that sedimented time and created place: they fostered a mesh of stable social and material relations, shared stories and situated events. The frequent stops of the trains required the construction of many infrastructures along the railroad that became spaces of socialisation (between travellers, train workers, neighbours, hawkers, peddlers). Company towns and villages developed in relation to the maintenance of trains and railways (Cuéllar et al. 2003; Ferrari 2006), which in the case of South America often had a semi-colonial character, as the inhabitants were originally in large part foreigners (Plens 2004). Today, material infrastructures related to transportation tend to favour social atomisation and depoliticisation. A similar paradoxical densification of place and time can be identified in relation to the development of the first national road networks adapted to motor vehicles. In Spain, the mark of a slower temporality in a time of acceleration is provided by the abandoned houses of *peones camineros* (“road workers”) (Figure 6.5). The *peones* were people in charge of the maintenance of a particular tract of road at least until the mid-twentieth century (Villar 2010). Their houses were built every 10–15 kilometres, often in remote and unpopulated areas and, with the roads themselves and railways, were part of an attempt to construct—materially—the modern nation-state. Workers lived in the houses with their families and constructed a world around them made of wells, pens, orchards, ovens, fruit trees and paths, where the slow temporality of the peasant coexisted with the accelerating speed of the nation-state.



**FIGURE 6.5** The fast time of modernity replaced by the superfast time of hypermodernity: ruins of the house of a worker in charge of maintaining a tract of the modern road network of Spain. Photograph by Manolo Franco (in the open domain: <https://pixabay.com/es/casa-peones-camineros-nerja-790592/>).



Speed not only brought new infrastructures. Destruction itself has also become faster during the last century. Dresden or Hamburg were razed to the ground in a few hours, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki in a few seconds. Today, the total devastation of cities in war (even in minor conflicts) is taken for granted and in some cases they cause the almost absolute annihilation of all traces of the past. More important from the perspective of temporality are the fast cycles (within a generation) of destruction and reconstruction to which we have grown accustomed. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is a good case in point: Palestinian towns in Gaza have been regularly bombed and bulldozed in recent years, but a large part of the infrastructure is then reconstructed through UN-sponsored efforts only to be destroyed again (Weizman 2007: 203).

The same acceleration is clear in the case of purely anthropogenic interventions. Lévi-Strauss already stressed the radical change of scale in landscape modification in the New World, as compared to the ancient agricultural lands of Europe. It was not just the spatial vastness of New World agricultural colonisation that struck him, but the pace: what in the Old World had taken millennia to unfold, had been achieved in a few decades in Brazil—at a terrible ecological and cultural price (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 103–104; also Gordillo 2014) (Figure 6.6). A sudden transformation of landscape, although often with less lasting consequences is that produced by war. Pre-industrial landscapes all over the world have been transformed into large-scale industrial meat grinders by the military machine in just weeks (Saunders 2002).

Yet the best example of accelerated ruination derives from one of the essential elements of capitalism: economic cycles of boom and bust (see also Chapter 2). Their

**FIGURE 6.6** An instant agroindustrial landscape: this was a rainforest until the 1990s. Maranhão state, Brazil. Author's photograph.



effects are particularly obvious in South America, where predatory capitalism operates with few restraints. In Brazil and Paraguay, different economic cycles (rubber, coffee, soya) have left forests and cities ruined (Gordillo 2014; González-Ruibal 2017). In Chile, it was saltpetre that produced unheard-of riches, although only for a short time, from 1880 to 1930. The exploitation of nitrate and sulphur brought about the emergence of a complex assemblage that included mine shafts, mining offices, railways and railway stations, towns, harbours, dumps, and ephemeral mining camps. Of course the industry also brought people. Thousands of immigrants came to populate the deserts of Atacama and Tarapacá (Vilches et al. 2014). The rapidity with which these boom-and-bust cycles took place and their impact on remote regions explain that sometimes archaeology is the best, if not the only, source to explore them (Figure 6.7). In fact, some sites related to the mining industry are ephemeral camps rather than heavy complexes of capitalist exploitation (Vilches and Morales 2017). Even when the economic exploitation has continued, more efficient methods of extraction led to the reduction of the workforce and the physical and symbolic decline of towns in a few decades (Rodríguez Torrent and Miranda Brown 2008). Many settlements underwent a process of devolution, shrinking from towns to camps. Urban life vanished when mining centres that had been designed as model (even utopian) towns were transformed, due to economic imperatives, into seasonal residences for a floating population of miners coming from outside. The situation was similar in the western United States a few decades before, with mining and company towns flourishing and collapsing following the fast cycles of predatory capitalism (Hardesty 1988; Matthews 2010).

Late modernity has been often portrayed as hypereventfulness (Sewell 2008). The problem is that many modern events (like ancient ones) have left little to no trace in the archaeological



**FIGURE 6.7** The accelerated time of capitalism: ruins of the company town of Chacabuco in the Atacama Desert. Photo by Flora Vilches.



record—May 1968 in Paris, for one. There are more lasting phenomena that did solidify in material form and that are amenable to archaeological scrutiny. Good examples of short-lived super-modern phenomena are imperialism and real socialism. If we consider that modern imperialism as such started with the Berlin conference in 1885 and the effective occupation of Africa by European powers, then it can be considered liquidated as a political phenomenon in 75 years—needless to say, the effects of imperialism, however, are still overwhelming. Eric Hobsbawm (1994b: 79) described the Age of Empire as “brief even by the measure of a single human life”, but in this very short period of time in historical terms, the globe was deeply transformed and with far-reaching consequences. The material imprint of Western imperialism is massive. Cities, railways, roads, airports, mines, outposts in remote places were built from scratch. A large part of the imperial infrastructure now lies in ruins (Serrano Avilés 2009; Steinmetz 2010; Apoh 2013; Gordillo 2014), in contrast to that of other empires, such as the Roman or Chinese that lasted hundreds of years, like the empires themselves, and often outlived them for centuries. In fact, some of the settlements and buildings did not even survive the Age of Empire, such as doomed railways in the Brazilian forest (Hardman 1988), remote imperial outposts in Namibia (Steinmetz 2010), or Spanish towns in Equatorial Guinea (González-Ruibal et al. 2016).

In the case of communism, its short period comprises the time between 1917 and 1991. Its ruination, with its very peculiar material style (Andreassen et al. 2010), is redolent of that of ancient empires and civilisations, with the difference that it existed for a much briefer period and crumbled much faster (Figure 6.8). Related to the communist experiment are the ubiquitous remains of the Cold War (Schofield and Cocroft 2009; Hanson 2016). Here an entire constellation of artefacts and sites was made redundant after an extremely brief period of time and, perhaps uniquely in history, without ever having been used: their time ended before it started.

**FIGURE 6.8** Ruins of hypereventfulness: an abandoned Soviet building in Kłomino, Poland. Photograph by Kobiąka et al. (2016).



## ■ Heterochrony

It would be wrong, however, to reduce the temporality of supermodernity to the trope of acceleration, because our present is actually one of heterogeneous temporalities, some of which fit better the notion of acceleration than others. Saying that the past is everywhere abolished by an ever-growing present is inaccurate, as is saying that we are everywhere surrounded by the past. They are inaccurate, at least, as general statements. As Baschet (2018: 19) notes, there are presents that are more loaded with the past than others. What still characterises our contemporary era, even under the pressure of an ever-expanding supermodern time, is heterochrony. Despite its current success (Hamilakis 2011), the idea of multi-temporality dates back to the 1930s (Leduc 1999: 18; for early examples in archaeology, see McGlade 1999; Lucas 2004: 41–43, 96). Paradoxically, it has been historians, rather than archaeologists, who have done more to challenge conventional historicist periodisations. Thus, Jacques Le Goff (2014) wondered if it is really necessary to cut history into slices, at least in those proposed by unilinear historical regimes. He noted that many of the traits that we identify with the Middle Ages in Europe were still present and defining society as late as the eighteenth century, if not later. Le Roy Ladurie (1974), in turn, had already considered the years between 1300 and 1700 as a historical period (an “immobile time”) from the point of view of demography and material life, thus shattering the usual classifications and chronological conceptualisations of modernity. In turn, Arno Mayer (1981) insisted on taking into account the persistence of the *Ancien Régime* in Europe well into the twentieth century, most notably in material

and economic practices. Note that this does not deny conceptions of modernity as a deep break with the past (as discussed in Chapter 1), it simply challenges the notion that the break occurred everywhere and in every aspect of life at the same time.

Historical and post-medieval archaeology have been generally too subservient to the general frameworks established by traditional history and has often failed to keep track of the time of things. If we follow the trajectory of the material, however, we might be able to construct more original, and thus relevant, narratives (Witmore 2013: 138). Instead of imposing a specific chronological frame, we have to allow entities “to define, to frame, themselves” (Witmore 2013: 140). If we do this, we may find phenomena that cross-cut conventional chronological divides and classifications. We may find the Neolithic in supermodernity. Derrida (2006: xviii) wrote about the “non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present”. Yet, archaeologists seem all too often bent into looking at the synchronicity of the time they study, as they focus on the artefacts that are considered representative of a certain period and that usually replace artefacts and material worlds representative of other, older traditions. What does not fit is considered “residual”—a concept that is redolent of the nineteenth-century idea of “survival” (Lucas 2012: 29–33, 2015: 7–8)—or is simply overlooked (but see Silliman 2001; Rodríguez-Alegría 2008). A good case in point is Deetz’s famous study of the Georgian house and its replacement of pre-Georgian domestic architecture (Deetz 1977: 156–164). The relevance of this change cannot be underestimated, but we may end up believing that pre-Georgian houses vanished from the Earth. They did not, and people kept using them. A contrary example, where the stress is put on temporal resilience instead of change, is offered by Laurent Olivier (2008: 246–248). He studied a collection of mining lamps from 1840 to 1975 and discovered that their evolution was disconnected from the “real” time of chronology. In the 1850s, mining lamps were ahead of the technological developments of the time, but after 1910, “the trajectory of typological time definitely moves away from real time and becomes immobilised in the past.” Olivier (2008: 249) reminds us of Henri Bergson’s critique: conventional historical representations forget that history “is as much about transformation and change as about duration and accumulation”.

The tendency to narrate synchronous stories, then, produces a homogeneous historicity in which historical phases are well-bounded and self-contained. Yet, artefacts are not so obedient (Olsen 2010). Historicism offers a time that does not overflow its limits nor drag the heavy weight of history, a time that does not percolate, has no folds or creases (Witmore 2006). What I suggest, then, is to pursue the time of things in the contemporary era, regardless of conventional phases established by historians. If there is a thing that resists being forced into time compartments, it is vernacular buildings. The slow time of folk architecture has often challenged chronological classification. Traditional houses tend to look suspended in time: a-chronic (without time, eternal) or anachronistic (of the wrong time), depending on whether we look at them from a nationalist, ethnic, romantic, or modernist perspective. The long chronologies of vernacular buildings are time-trespassing: overall, the longhouses of northern Europe show considerably little variation from Neolithic to medieval times. It comes as no surprise that traditional homes have been the target of modernist ideologies (González-Ruibal 2005; González Álvarez and Alonso 2014) and dictatorial regimes that want the present to be contemporary with itself (or rather, with the future). Thus, the Ceaușescu Regime engaged in a programme of elimination of vernacular architecture in rural areas so as to erase the differences between cities and countryside: the future had to be urban and modern. The anachronism of vernacular buildings was solved by building four-storey concrete blocks for the peasants (Pavel 2004: 89–90). It has been argued that in traditional houses, the past is not as much separate from, as subsumed in, the present (Anderson, S. 1999: 16). In fact, the past

**FIGURE 6.9** The heterochronies of the contemporary era: the sulphur camp of Ojo de Toro in northern Chile—global capitalism and premodern materiality. Photograph by Flora Vilches.



is always subsumed in the present in different ways, but in vernacular architecture, the past weighs heavier than in modernist buildings. Besides, folk buildings do not deny the temporal mixture of which they are composed.

This brings me to another issue: the temporality of contemporary building materials. If we think of supermodern materiality, what immediately comes to mind are modern materials: “modern ruins are made of iron, glass and concrete” (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014a: 6). It is these ruins that attract both archaeologists of modernity and artists (Bruno 2011), because they are perfectly synchronous with the era. However, by looking at what is coherent with hegemonic time, we forget the proliferation of other material manifestations. We forget that mud, stone and wood have dominated the history of the twentieth-century built environment and shaped the social experience and temporal rhythms of hundreds of millions of human beings—and still do. The herder camps of the Atacama Desert, although totally inserted in capitalist industrial networks of the early twentieth century, “have never been modern; modernity is found in the relationship between the business owner and the indigenous worker”, not in their materiality, which remains one of unmortared stone walls and sand floors (Vilches and Morales 2017: 383) (Figure 6.9). Paul Oliver (2003: 86), in turn, reminds us that even at the turn of the twenty-first century there were an estimated 50 million people living in caves. Yet even supermodern phenomena, such as industrialised battlefields, are not necessarily of steel and concrete, but of wood and earth (Passmore et al. 2014). Furthermore, the arrow of modern time can be inverted and modern materials be superseded by older crafts: on the coast of Somaliland, modern colonial towns that were funded at the end of the nineteenth-century collapsed by the mid-twentieth and were replaced by nomadic settlements of mat huts and brush fences (Torres et al. 2017) (Figure 6.10) and the collective farms of concrete and steel created by the communist government of Ethiopia were replaced after its collapse by houses of wood, mud and thatch (González-Ruibal 2006b). By focusing



**FIGURE 6.10** The heterochronies of the contemporary era: a nomadic home in Somaliland—premodern materiality after modernity. Author's photograph.



solely on concrete, we help homogenise the contemporary era, reducing it to that which is new and changing.

The heterogeneity of the contemporary era has at least two specific causes. First, the hyper-eventfulness of modernity leaves a trail of other temporalities behind (those of communism and peasant communities, for example), which, even vanquished, still persist as ruins that overwhelm entire landscapes. Second, modernity's expansion has been so fast that it has not yet been able to level out the temporal disparities it has found in its way. Rather, they have been simply absorbed and marginalised within the global time of capital—like indigenous temporalities (Verdesio 2013). Despite this heterogeneity, some of the temporalities that coexist with modernity are negated or displaced. This is what happens with anything that is deemed “primitive” time. Christopher Matthews (2007), for instance, reminds us that Indians in North America were first integral in everyday colonial life (that is, accepted in the time of modernity), but later removed as part of the programmes of American state formation and expansion (that is, displaced to the time defined as “Prehistory”). “A continuing Indian presence,” writes Matthews (2007: 274) “was negotiated in political terms that made Indians knowable only as anachronisms unsuited for the modern world.”

The time of supermodernity does not only marginalise the peoples that do not fit the ethos of acceleration and change. The same happens with things. Slow or static things are often forgotten. This has a lot to do with the modernist attitude, which revels in transformation, contrary to traditional identities that find ontological security in immobility (Hernando 2002). History, which has become an essential part of modern identity, is associated with change and opposed to tradition. Thus, historical archaeology has paid more attention to this higher order of historicity



that is expressed in continuous transformation. From the point of view of material culture, this explains that our attention is continuously drawn to everything that evolves fast, like smart-phones or nanotechnology, and not to the things that remain and resist change, such as wooden grape presses and stone bread ovens (Edgerton 2007: 207). This also explains the low attraction that vernacular architecture, a slow form of materiality as I pointed out, has had on academic researchers—with remarkable exceptions (Glassie 1975; Upton and Vlach 1986). Its investigation has been often considered to fall under the scope of folklore studies (a subaltern discipline in relation to anthropology or history) or local amateurs. Even things that are notoriously reluctant to transformation (and rightly so) tend to be cast in the language of acceleration or transformation.

This can be found also in some research in historical archaeology that looks at ancient technologies in modern contexts. For example, both Silliman (2001) and Harrison (2006) stress the novelty in the use of lithic artefacts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is not that far-reaching changes in the social context of technology are to be disregarded, but too much focus on transformation may lead us to forget about continuity, which is at least as important—doubtless for the people that use traditional technologies. Instead, Anne Mayor (2010) has emphasised the long duration of pottery traditions in Western Africa, many of whose technical and formal traits have seen little variation for centuries or even millennia and thrive in the present. Most importantly, some of these pottery traditions have remained associated to specific ethnic and linguistic identities for hundreds of years. Pots, lithic tools, or vernacular houses are not supermodern, of course, but they coexist with the hegemonic time of supermodernity. They cannot simply be left aside from the archaeology of the recent past as non-contemporary, or considered only valid as purveyors of ethnographic analogies.

It would be misleading, however, to think that only technically simple things (such as mechanical tools, crockery, or foodstuffs) defy supermodern acceleration. Consider three elements that we immediately associate with unrelenting change due to their sophistication: airplanes, cars and weapons (Edgerton 2007). Despite continuous innovation, the truth is that commercial jets, in essence, have changed little since the appearance of the Boeing 707 in 1957 and some models from the 1960s still cross the skies, including the Boeing 737 (designed 1967), which is the most commonly used airplane today. The performance of automobiles has not changed drastically either since the late 1940s. The basic technology itself (the internal combustion engine) was devised in 1878 and the external design of automobiles has not changed dramatically since at least the 1960s. When it comes to weapons, while our attention is focused on drones and the cyborg-like aspect of modern warriors, we forget that assault rifles date to the 1950s and the bullets that they shoot have changed little since 1885 (Cornish 2013: 11); archaeologically, a 2018 battlefield does not differ much from a 1918 one.

## ■ The time of tragedy and hope

The temporality of the contemporary era has been impoverished in many ways. Despite persisting heterochronies, the now tends to occupy more and more space, the past is annihilated in new ways, and life happens at an accelerated pace. In this context, contemporary archaeology can become an ally of post-mnemonic societies, engaged in the solipsistic examination of the present qua present, or it can make contemporary time richer, more complex and disturbing. These possibilities are inherent to the archaeological record of the recent past and its peculiar status. If an archaeological site from a thousand years ago is—usually—a dead site, in that most processes have been stopped or brought to a standstill (as if in a coma), abandoned places lie

somewhere in between death and life: a time of agony that is non-systemic but not yet fully archaeological either (see Chapter 1). It is precisely in this twilight zone where most things happen in an archaeological site, as people who have studied abandonment processes know. Pawel Gorecki (1985), in an ethnoarchaeological study in Papua New Guinea, discovered that more changes take place in the first few years after a site is abandoned than in the following tens of millennia. When studying recent ruins, then, we study the most dynamic period of an abandoned site. It is rich, eventful time.

The time of agony is also a time after history. History, at least in its dominant historicist version, is usually presented as a series of phenomena that follow one another. If one reads a history of the twentieth century, no matter whether it is oriented towards the *événementielle* or to *mentalités*, some phenomena invariably fade from view while others achieve prominence. There is little room for failures, ruins and the debris of history, for the things that get stranded in the way: what happened to the colonial outposts after decolonisation, to the nuclear silos after the Cold War, to the peasant farmhouses when peasants migrated to the cities? What goes on during this time of agony in which things vanish physically and from our memories? It is as if this was an excess or surplus time, a temporal waste that can be simply discarded. Taking cue from Hirsch's (2008) postmemory, I would call this redundant time post-history and argue that post-history is the field of much contemporary archaeology: to study what happened after everything happened. Archaeology can be more relevant in the study of post-history, of abandoned battlefields for instance (Herva 2014), than about history itself. In the prison of Carabanchel in Madrid, between its abandonment in 1998 and its demolition in 2008, many things happened, unrelated or thinly related to the history of the prison in use (González-Ruibal and Ortiz García 2015). The space underwent all kinds of material transformations, many objects were subtracted, but many others were added; a new, transient ecosystem emerged, in which people, animals, natural elements and pollution had a part. The premises were occupied by Roma and undocumented migrants, looted by scrap dealers, painted over by graffiti artists, used as a training ground by the police, as a playground by teenagers, as a place of memory, resistance and promise by former political prisoners and activists (Figure 6.11). For the historian, the history of Carabanchel ends in 1998. For an archaeologist, it starts there.

The time of agony is often a reversible time. It is not only that during the early period of abandonment things happen. It is also that they *can* happen. There is room for hope (and fear). To do an archaeology of the recent past is to give oxygen to the last breath of the dead or the dying. It is a resurrection of a kind, as Barthes (1981: 82) sees in photographs, but usually an ephemeral one: like the short-lived resurrection provided by the shock of a defibrillator. It is trying to come to terms with what we love and hate before we can let it go. It is doing what we cannot do with people. When they die, they die. Many things are left untold, unsolved. Many things that we would have wanted to ask, to clarify. We can ask ruins, abandoned things, the personal objects of the deceased. And then we can bury them properly. It is not only through exhuming bodies that we can exorcise the spectres of the past.

Marc Augé has suggested that ruins offer a vision of no time in particular, but of pure time: "To watch ruins", writes Augé (2003: 45), "is not to make a journey to history, but to live the experience of time." For him, ruin-gazing

allows us to catch a fleeting glimpse of the existence of a time that is not the one about which history books speak or the one that restoration works try to resuscitate. It is a pure time, to which no date can be assigned.

(Augé 2003: 7)

**FIGURE 6.11** Making History after the end of history: political mobilisation in the ruins of the prison of Carabanchel, Madrid. Author's photograph.



Other authors maintain similar ideas, Dillon (2011: 11) argues that ruins act as “a way of loosening ourselves from the grip of punctual chronologies, setting ourselves adrift in time”. A hundred years before, Alois Riegl (1982 [1903]) had already argued that the “age-value” of monuments lay in its evocation of the passage of time, not of any time in particular. This feeling is especially strong in the ruins of the recent past, which often have the patina and the aspect of a prehistoric ruin. The indiscernibility of the time characteristic of modern ruins can be seen as a temporal impoverishment, a simplification of history, which is reduced to an abstract feeling. I believe that modern ruins are more interesting than that, and more complex. They materialise a time that is simultaneously very vague (the passage of time, pure time, patina) and extremely precise. It is in this productive tension where both the fascination for modern ruins and a new form of knowledge actually arise. It is this tension that enriches time. Thus, the potency of a trench that my colleagues and I excavated in the last Republican line of the Battle of the Ebro, in Catalonia, does not only lie in the entropy to which it is subjected, in its blending with an old agricultural landscape and its geology. The potency lies in the realisation that this site that is fading towards pure time, and melting into an ancient Mediterranean landscape of olive trees and terraces, is also from a very precise time: the cartridges and grenades that we recover among the ruins of the trench are dated very exactly to the morning of 15 November 1938 (González-Ruibal 2016a: 213–215). This is the difference between the archaeological gaze and that of the *flâneur* or the artist: as archaeologists, we see pure time, but also an instant and, not less importantly, history in its most historicist and *événementielle*. Those who feel attracted by the ethereal and aesthetic aspects of ruins underestimate the

relevance of the precise historicist chronology of recent sites. It is not by chance that remnants of the Soviet era, Nazism, or specific wars are more disturbing than those that cannot be so definitely bounded and labelled—say, an abandoned farm of the eighteenth century. The temporality of the ruin exceeds and at the same time is constrained by historicity: archaeological interventions, instead of dissolving the historicity of the ruin, bring it into relief. This is what makes the toppled-down statues of Lenin so fascinating in the first place (Andreassen et al. 2010: 44–45; Ackermann and Gobert 2017) (Figure 6.12). They encapsulate a very definite era that by being bounded becomes remote, while at the same time remains close to us.

Beyond historicity, the ability to capture a single moment, frozen in time (an ephemeral event made material), is perhaps one of the greatest assets of the archaeology of the contemporary past. The difficulty (or outright impossibility) of capturing real events in the archaeological record has been a matter of debate for a long time (cf. Lucas 2012: 103). However, in the case of the recent past, specific moments—understood not as small-scale structures (Lucas 2012: 181), but as unique, ephemeral events—are key for producing a sense of presence (Gumbrecht 2004). These moments characterise an epoch in all its intensity: for example, a series of bullet holes on an execution wall that was used only once for this purpose (Figure 6.13). In that, archaeology reminds us of painting or sculpture, as described by Lessing (1853: 16), which are confined to manifest a single moment due to its material limitations. Although Lessing has been criticised for the rigid dualism and his downplaying of the dynamic capacity of those arts, the relevance of stasis should not be underestimated. To be limited to an instant is a constraint, but also an advantage. It increases the intensity of witnessing and its uncanny qualities: we have to add with our imaginations the before and the afterwards, like in a crime scene. What we have is,

**FIGURE 6.12** Pure time and historicist time together: a bust of Lenin in Pyramiden, Svalbard, Norway. Photograph by Bjørnar Olsen.





**FIGURE 6.13** Touching the instant of horror: impacted bullets from a wall used for executions during the Spanish Civil War. Author's photograph.



often, the most tragic moment (the moment of death or violence or despair). Sometimes a snapshot can capture the drama of an era better than a narrative.

Historicity, as revealed by archaeology and historical documents, is also important because it posits a definite end date. In the mere passage of time, in pure time, there is no drama. Drama lies in beginnings and endings, especially sudden, tragic ones. To know the end transforms the very existence of the thing. This is eloquently expressed in Moritz Heinmann's sentence quoted by Walter Benjamin (1968: 100): "A man who dies at the age of thirty-five is at every point of his life a man who dies at the age of thirty-five." The buildings and objects of the Soviet era have deeply inscribed death and defeat in them, even those dating well before the end could be envisaged. "The statement that makes no sense in real life", writes Benjamin in relation to Heinmann's sentence, "becomes indisputable in remembered life". And what are the ruins explored by an archaeologist but remembered life?

In summoning the past, we work as shamans: we bring the dead to life; we make them present and they come to speak to us. We see them, even when others do not. What we perform as archaeologists, however, is an operation that has not been properly appraised in all its consequences. Archaeology abolishes a tenet of modern rationality: for the modern, the past is located in another time (the time of ancient Rome, or the Mayas, or Prehistory). But archaeology does not fully comply with a nonmodern (traditional) rationality either, for which the past is located in another space—like the Christian heaven and hell (Hernando 2002: 10, 206). The shaman's art consists in making the space of the ancestors and the space of the living converge. For archaeology, instead, the past is located neither in another time nor in another space, but *here and now*, in this space and in this time (Olivier 2008: 86). We do not have to bring the past and the present together, because they are already. We only have to reveal their coevalness. Archaeological time, then, is neither a modern nor a traditional time.



When working with remains of the contemporary era, we undertake a particularly subversive task: we de-modernise modernity.

There is a second element that makes archaeological time unique. Archaeology transforms sites through excavation, an essentially archaeological method. As I mentioned in my discussion of Améry (Chapter 4), through excavation we arrive at the moment *before* everything happened. When we dig, at the beginning we find the end, and at the end, the beginning. At the bottom of the sondage, there is the primeval emptiness, which can be terrifying. In the cemetery of Castuera, we dug two mass graves of people who were executed by right-wing militia during the Spanish Civil War (Muñoz Encinar et al. 2013). One had 11 bodies, the other 22. When we finished the excavation of the first mass grave and the corpses of the killed had been removed, we saw a dreadful void (see Figure 4.4): the mass grave before becoming a mass grave. Sometimes the most terrible place is the place where there is nothing, where nothing has still happened.

This is related to Barthes' *punctum*. He refers to the photograph of Alexander Gardner, taken in 1865, immediately before his execution: "The punctum is: *he is going to die*. I read at the same time: This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake" (Barthes 1981: 96). Ruins, like photographs, carry with them the beginning and the end. The trenches of the Spanish Civil War that surround the University City of Madrid are the materialisation of the anti-fascist cry: *No pasarán!* "They will not pass!" They did pass, but it is as if the trenches were disobeying History in their stubbornness, in their refusal to disappear: with moving loyalty, they keep guarding Madrid against the armies of Franco. The war is over and not yet over. The bloody revenge of the Nationalists, which will lead to 4,000 executions in the capital, has not yet started and is already finished. By materialising an open past, a past which is still relevant to the present and presents other possibilities, the time of archaeology is also a time of hope.

## ■ Summary

The time of our era has been described as both excessive and unjust. In this chapter, I have examined some phenomena that allow us to characterise supermodern time in both ways. I have examined presentism, the annihilation of time, time acceleration and heterochrony. Presentism refers to the absolute predominance of the present over all other times. The very existence of the archaeology of the contemporary past can be related to the ideology of the present. The same can be said of the mandate of usefulness that is imposed on the social sciences and the humanities and that is equated with immediate applicability—thus the success of heritage management. However, the field can also be a critical tool in the struggle against presentism, too. For that, it has to take seriously the tenet that contemporary archaeology is the archaeology of our era *and* of all other pasts that coexist with it.

One of the material manifestations of presentism is the annihilation of the material traces of the past, at least those pasts that are not transformed into heritage or pastiche—which in itself can be considered if not annihilation, at least a form of neutralisation. The destruction of alternative pasts has always been on the agenda of authoritarian regimes, which have promoted historicist and homogeneous narratives. It has taken a more sinister dimension during the contemporary era, however, when such regimes have engaged in the obliteration of the present, the future and the past of political opponents. Yet even under (neo)liberal regimes, the past is continuously annihilated in the celebration of the present and the future. The post-mnemonic city (Connerton 2009) is the result of such chronocidal practices.

Annihilation is fuelled by acceleration. Although described as the quintessential trait of modern and capitalist time, acceleration is not distributed democratically. There are people who move faster and more often. Differential speeds leave differential material traces. Yet there are forms of velocity that are global and so are the ruins they leave behind: the capitalist cycles of boom and bust, the fast destruction of cities by the supermodern war machinery and their equally fast reconstruction, the hyper-eventfulness of the contemporary era, that keeps piling the ruins of historical phenomena (communism, imperialism) one on top of the other.

Acceleration is very real and tangible, but so is the fact that there are still many different temporalities around. The concept of heterochrony is helpful to refer to the diverging paths of change and temporal rhythms occurring at the same time in the world, in the same society, even in the same artefact. Heterochrony, in fact, is particularly visible in the material world. Nonmodern materialities—from vernacular houses to traditional tools—although harassed by modernity, refuse to disappear and bring with them a different experience of time and deeper connections with remote pasts. Even the most advanced technology, such as aircraft and weapons, incorporates traces of the ancient. An archaeology of the contemporary era should be attentive to those genealogies that the ideology of presentism makes us forget. This chapter ends with a reflection on the particular temporality manifested by contemporary archaeology: a time simultaneously vague and extremely precise, a time of tragedy, but also of hope.

## Note

- 1 Some parts of the present chapter have already been published in slightly different form elsewhere. See González-Ruibal 2014 and 2016c.

# 7

## Space

ONE OF THE points that makes Marc Augé's concept of supermodernity appealing to archaeologists is his concern with space. According to Augé (2002) the time of supermodernity is marked by a shift from places to non-places: "If place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, a space that cannot be defined as relational, historical or concerned with identity can be defined as a non-place" (Augé 2002: 83). Non-places do not foster symbolic relationships or a shared heritage. Their purpose is only to facilitate circulation and consumption in a global world (Augé 2003: 101). Non-places have all the appearance of a *dejà vu*, which is not innocent: their mission is precisely to neutralise the sense of alienation in a foreign environment (Harrison and Schofield 2010: 256). They eliminate the place-ness of places. Airports, highways and the metro are typical non-places. Elsewhere, Augé (2003: 71) distinguishes between two categories: non-places of refuge and non-places of image (simulacra). The non-places of refuge are related to emigration and escape. We could include here detention centres for immigrants, customs posts and refugee camps. The non-places of image are best exemplified in theme parks and tourist resorts—all virtually identical from one corner of the globe to the other. The idea that the supermodern world is filled with simulacra is shared by other thinkers. Jean Baudrillard (1994), for instance, employed the term "simulacrum" to define something that is not a copy of the real but actually exceeds reality and creates its own truth. This hyperreality of the supermodern Augé finds not just in new constructions, but also in the restoration of heritage.

Although the actual existence of non-places has often been questioned (e.g. Bender 2001: 78), it can still be argued that there are spaces in supermodernity that if not totally devoid of identity, relationality, or historicity, are at least hostile to the idea of memory and belonging. Archaeologists have started to study non-places in a way that is akin to de Certeau's (1984) approach to everyday tactics of resistance. Against the idea of monolithic non-places, researchers reveal the practices through which they can be appropriated and resisted (Graves-Brown 2007). Harrison and Schofield (2010: 256–257) suggest that if non-places are presented as neutral and ahistorical, archaeology has to reveal "the specific histories of these places and the ways in which they are concealed from the public". Gabriella Soto (2016), following this approach, studies how undocumented immigrants create a sense of place through the appropriation of highway box culverts with graffiti, while Penrose (2007: 56), describes the many uses to which a non-place par excellence, the parking lot, is put in Bristol: car-boot barter and exchange, licit and illicit sex, drug trafficking and consumption. A somewhat similar approach is that of geographer Tim Edensor (2005), whose work has focused on abandoned industrial buildings. Rather than non-places in Augé's terminology, they could be considered empty or leftover spaces, as proposed by Zygmunt Bauman (see below). Although they are commonly perceived as a black hole in the urban fabric, Edensor shows that ruined factories are also arenas for

creative engagements with materiality, where the regimented space of the supermodern city is actively subverted. The heterodox uses to which these ruins are put are a hint of another possible city and alternative urban experiences (see also Hudson 2014).

Non-places, as defined by Augé, are just one variable of the spatial excess of supermodernity and probably not the one that is more amenable to archaeological scrutiny. Other kinds of space represent equally well, if not better, the excessive nature of the contemporary era and its tendency to produce redundant space. In what follows, I will explore some of the elements that characterise supermodern spatial excess: expansion, impoverishment, ephemerality, division and waste.

## ■ Expansion

The excessive spatiality of the contemporary era can be measured by the sheer scale of spatial expansion. It has been argued that we live now in a moment when there is no outside capitalism, there are no longer spatial frontiers for the expansion of capital (Hardt and Negri 2000). “What the sixteenth century set in motion was perfected by the 20th,” writes Peter Sloterdijk (2013: 33), “No point on the Earth’s surface, once money had stopped off there, could escape the fate of becoming a location.” The archaeology of supermodernity is the archaeology of the entire world becoming a location. The discipline provides what is perhaps the most eloquent pictures of this. Commodities for the first time appear in the most remote corners (Figure 7.1): spongeware produced in the Netherlands during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is documented in remote locations of sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia (Floor and Otte 2013). For the first time in history also, global margins are connected among themselves. But it is not just commodities that travel: the same happens with weapons or concentration camps. Although they are seldom considered as symbols of globalisation (indeed, they are seen as opposed to free movement), they constitute perhaps even better proof of the spatial integration of the contemporary world.

Supermodernity in fact often renders the notion of locality meaningless: many phenomena are not confined to a specific locale, but spread, ramify and have effects in remote regions: thus, the construction of the water supply infrastructure of New York led to the ruination and abandonment of a large area far beyond the city’s boundaries, through the construction of reservoirs (Beisaw 2016), whereas the Blue Streak intercontinental missile project linked through specific infrastructures a series of places as far removed as England and Australia (Cocroft and Wilson 2006). Even very ephemeral global events can deeply transform landscapes in remote places, as shown by the deployment of Soviet missiles in Cuba that led to the Missile Crisis of 16–28 October 1962, which is related to heavy and lasting modifications in the Cuban countryside (Burström et al. 2011). The spatial expansion of supermodernity can also be materially grasped through the human inscription on the space of very remote areas. Some regions have seen human settlement for the first time during the contemporary era. Antarctica, for instance, became an anthropogenic space only at the dawn of supermodernity (Zarankin and Salerno 2014). Other empty areas have become heavily modified human landscapes in a very short time. The Red Sea coast, for instance, is no longer a sparsely inhabited desert, but the scenario of “extravagant resorts and desalination plants from one end of Egypt to the other” (Ward 2014: 117).

The Second World War was a period of remarkable spatial expansion. The point is perhaps not so much that it was during the war that certain places were reached for the first time, but that for the first time extremely remote places were deeply imprinted with a human presence.

**FIGURE 7.1** The archaeology of globalisation: a Coca-Cola bottle found in a house on the island of Corisco, Equatorial Guinea, abandoned in the 1960s or 1970s. Author's photograph.



In extreme regions, such as the Arctic, most sites were abandoned shortly after the war or even before, but the anthropogenic trace remained (Jensen and Krause 2014). Other areas, that had been occupied for centuries or millennia, were enmeshed for the first time in global networks and their landscapes deeply transformed. This is the case, for instance, of northern Norway, Finland and Russia. Like Antarctica, this is a place associated with wilderness and pristine nature, but the ubiquitous traces of the Second World War showed its incorporation into supermodern spatiality (Olsen and Witmore 2014; Grabowski et al. 2014; Herva 2014) (Figure 7.2). On the other side of the world, the southern Pacific also saw a dense occupation



**FIGURE 7.2** The archaeology of globalisation: the wreck of a T-34 tank abandoned in north-west Russia, on the Barents Sea coast. The machine was probably destroyed by a German antitank gun. Photograph by Bjørnar Olsen.



of islands and atolls that had been hitherto either empty or scarcely visited. During the war, they became part of the extended spatiality of supermodernity by being engulfed in its excessive materiality (Jeffery 2006; Spannemann 2006). Indeed, archaeology is particularly suited to document the spatial expansion of supermodernity by mapping its litter. The spatiality of supermodern debris could be in a way compared to that of Paleolithic communities, where lithics scattered through the landscape have been named “off-sites” (Foley 1981). The difference, however, is that the time in which vast expanses have been covered with redundant materials is incomparably much shorter in the case of the contemporary era: a few decades instead of tens of thousands of years. Yet nowhere is the spatial excess of our age better manifested than in the occupation of spaces beyond the earth. It has been only during the second half of the twentieth century that humans have reached the planet’s exosphere and even the Moon and Mars have become anthropogenic spaces (Gorman 2005; O’Leary and Capelotti 2015). There are over fifty heliocentric artefacts at the moment and five that have abandoned or will abandon the solar system (Capelotti 2015: 54–55).

## ■ Impoverishment

We live in a world that is spatially impoverished. By impoverishment, I refer to Walter Benjamin’s “poverty of experience”, but I am not so much interested in how space-time compression has changed social representations (Harvey 1989: 239). As an archaeologist, I am much more concerned with the material simplification caused by physically flattened spaces, which in turn produce impoverished spatial experiences. Flat space is made possible

by modern rationalities and technologies. My argument is that spatial flattening happens along three dimensions. It has a horizontal dimension—the straight lines of modern traveling that prevent us from having social interactions, relations with the landscape and unexpected encounters. It also has a vertical dimension, which is manifested in the levelling-out of topography to make room for cities, roads and other infrastructures. A third dimension combines time and space: excessive modernity clears all traces of the past in the landscape and creates a space that is temporally homogeneous and synchronic.

Horizontal simplification is the most discussed of the three forms of supermodern flattening that I will examine here. It refers to the impoverishment of spatial experiences motivated by the fast technologies of supermodernity. Highways, airways and high-speed trains connect very distant points in very little time, at the cost of simplifying our relation to the landscape. Space is uncurled, stretched out and made straight. The effects that this has in experience is better grasped when the material modifications are sudden: when I first visited the Awá reservation of Juriti in Maranhão State, Brazil, in 2005, it took my companions and me three days to reach the place—two days by car and one day through a winding river in a small motorboat. The motor failed and we had to spend the night in a farm by the river. This led to an encounter with people—*caboclos*, landless farmers that subsist by slash-and-burn agriculture and fishing—and with things: the rich material world of the *caboclos* (Figure 7.3). During the following three years reaching the Awá reservation became a rite of passage, where all kinds of encounters were possible. In 2008, the last year we visited the Awá, an illegal road had been cut through the rainforest, making the boat trip unnecessary. In our return from fieldwork, we reached the state capital, São Luis, a megalopolis of one million inhabitants, in one day by car. The mystery of the journey—the sense of ritual, transition and danger—was lost. The road had implications beyond our notions of travel and temporality, of course. It meant easier and faster access to the untapped riches of the Awá forest, which has undergone accelerated deforestation since our last visit to the reservation. In the case of the United States, the vestiges of interstate roads superseded by four-lane highways have become a particular photographic genre, populated by abandoned motels, gas stations, shops and restaurants (Vergara and Samuelson 2001: 64–70; Worobiec and Worobiec 2003: 129, 135–137). The social encounters enabled by long journeys have been simplified, shortened, or have disappeared altogether. One can, of course, have social encounters and adventures, but these have to be looked after or artificially created—as it happens in road movies and novels. They are not the spontaneous outcome of a prevailing materiality, as it was the case in the past. In fact, the road journey movie genre from the mid-twentieth century onwards can be considered a form of compensation for the loss of real experience brought about by freeways, fast trains and air travel.

Roads, airlines and railways are more than a simplification of spatial relations. They are also a simplification of ecological ones: modern road construction severs and fragments ecosystems and leads to ecological impoverishment in its area of influence. New relations between humans and non-humans, things, animals and plants, emerge, but they are less rich and complex. This is well known (Forman et al. 2003). What is perhaps less well known is the fact that ecosystems remain impoverished long after roads have been turned into a ruin: a study of abandoned tracks in the Mojave Desert in Nevada found out that full vegetation and soil recovery was not yet achieved after 87 years of abandonment (Bolling and Walker 2000: 21).

Vertical simplification has strong ecological implications as well. Land reclamation and the levelling of uneven topographies imply radical material alterations which have lasting

**FIGURE 7.3** Before spatial impoverishment: an unexpected encounter in the Carú River, Maranhão, Brazil, December 2005—the *caboclo* settlement of Nova Esperança, “New Hope”. Author’s photograph.



consequences for the existence of humans and non-humans alike. Architect Alvar Aalto bemoaned the topographical simplification of modern architecture when he wrote that “the city of hills, the curving, living, unpredictable line which runs in dimensions unknown to mathematicians, is for me the incarnation of everything that forms a contrast in the modern world between brutal mechanical-ness and religious beauty in life” (cited in Anderson, D. 2015: 92). Current technical means make possible the Cartesian dream of an empty homogeneous space that is ruled by mathematical calculations, not by the friction of matter. Mountains can be cut into two, continents severed by channels, cities and airports built on the ocean, entire regions flooded by colossal dams and their uneven geographies turned into a flat space (Figure 7.4). Pearson and Shanks (1997: 41–42) say that “land is disappeared” to refer to the spatial simplification brought about by dams and open-pit mining in Wales. Land and sea can also be neatly separated, further reinforcing the nature–culture divide of modernity. As Byrne (2018: 56) notes, in relation to land reclamation in Australia and Japan, the construction of seawalls erases “the ecologically rich ecotonal transition zone between aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems in favour of a hard-line interface between land and sea”. What had been hitherto fantasies fulfilled in most cases only on maps, have now become material facts that come close to the sci-fi topos of terraforming. Consider the small island of Etten, in the Truuk archipelago, Micronesia. The island was flattened out almost in its entirety by the Japanese between 1934 and 1943 with the aim of transforming it into a military airfield. Both the topography and the perimeter were dramatically modified by land reclamation in a way that made the island look like an aircraft carrier (Rainbird 2004: 177–179;



**FIGURE 7.4** Spatial impoverishment: making the world straight. Construction of new floodgates in the Panama Canal. Photograph by Carmen Andradás/Sacyr/CSIC.



Jeffery 2006: 148–149). Etten was later planted with coconut trees and is now largely forested, but the surface is littered with war debris and decaying concrete infrastructures that remind us of the artificial nature of the place.

Vertical simplification is particularly obvious in the case of high-speed trains, which are replacing older railroad systems in much of Europe. High-speed trains require large turning radii to operate and straight lines to maintain high speeds for long periods of time. The construction

of special rails implies heavy topographic modifications or the construction of large viaducts. This is in contrast to earlier rail systems, which were more adapted to the existing topography. Their ruination attests to modernity's growing need for speed.

Supermodernity not only flattens the three dimensions of Euclidean space. It also flattens a fourth dimension: time. Before supermodern spatio-temporal technologies came into existence, moving through space (walking or riding) meant moving through time. Consider the Via Appia or the Way of Saint James. People travelled along multilayered landscapes that unfolded slowly. Along the Via Appia, one walks among monuments stretching from late Republican times to the Middle Ages. In the same way that controlled-access highways impoverish spatial and social relations, they also break temporal links, by cutting ties with the past. Interestingly, the past as presence and materiality is often replaced by the past as evocation and image. This is the case with many European highways: by avoiding populated areas, they skip most visible traces of the past, which are then replaced by signs advertising them. A space of simulacra.

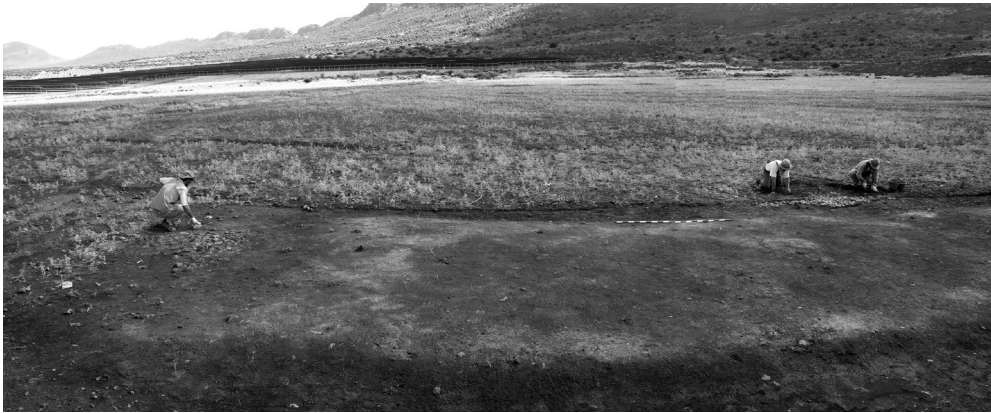
## ■ Ephemerality

Supermodern materialities are ephemeral—think of plastic wrapping, fashion, or planned obsolescence—and so are many of the spaces of our age. It is perhaps not a coincidence that ephemeral architecture developed at the threshold of the contemporary era: first with international fairs and then with cinema sets. The monumental buildings of Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 were made of "staff", an agglomerate of plaster, jute fibres, horsehair and other ingredients, which had the double advantage of enabling the carving of large architectural fantasies and of looking ancient (Graff 2012). The colossal structures had all but disappeared from the landscape by the end of 1896. Ephemerality is an essential trait of the contemporary world that deserves to be taken seriously by archaeologists (Bille and Sørensen 2016: 8) and in fact, solid infrastructures and megastructures have received less attention than sites that are occupied temporarily, with the exception of Cold War remains (Cocroft and Thomas 2003; Schofield and Cocroft 2009; Hanson 2016; also Edgeworth 2010, 2013; Edmonds 2010). This may be the case perhaps because the latter are more amenable to archaeological scrutiny and because they are associated with the small communities that prehistoric archaeology (and even historical archaeology) has studied more often. These ephemeral spaces can be linked to subaltern groups, such as foragers and pastoralists (Harrison 2002), itinerant workers (Camp 2011; Caraher et al. 2016), homeless people (Zimmerman et al. 2010; Kiddey 2017) and vagabonds (Symonds and Vařeka 2014), as well as counterhegemonic communities of hippies or protestors (Schofield and Anderton 2000; Fowles and Heupel 2013; Simms and Riel-Salvatore 2016). Although the presence of all these groups is often light, they do leave material traces that can be retrieved, among other reasons because they engage in repetitive actions in space (Zimmerman et al. 2010).

Ephemeral space, however, cannot be equated with marginalised groups. It can also be associated with mainstream society: in festivals and happenings (White 2013; Äikäs et al. 2016) and in the shifting use of solid spaces of consumption and popular culture, be they music clubs or malls (Schofield and Rellensmann 2015; Ryzewski 2017; Graves-Brown 2007: 79–80). And there is a dark side to ephemerality too: political violence, capitalist predation, war. Consider the buildings reused temporarily as detention centres (Zarankin and Salerno 2008; Myers 2010; González-Ruibal 2011; Fuenzalida 2017), or the unsubstantial and short-lived extermination and concentration camps (Theune 2010; Sturdy Colls 2015) (Figure 7.5).



**FIGURE 7.5** Ephemeral spaces: excavation of a prisoners' barracks in the concentration camp of Castuera, Spain, which operated only for one year (1939–1940) and was thoroughly dismantled afterwards. Author's photograph.



In fact, power resorts to the ephemeral on purpose, so as to leave as little trace as possible of its crimes. The political economy of predation characteristic of capitalism also creates temporary, flimsy spaces in which to carry out its operations. Many forts erected during the era of the Atlantic trade in Africa were assembled and disassembled rapidly (DeCorse 2010) and offshore capitalism works today through small outposts (company towns or oil rigs) with an expiry date (Appel 2012; Zarankin and Salerno 2014; Vilches and Morales 2017).

Another example of ephemeral yet solid spaces of power are those created through war and institutional violence: at the dawn of supermodernity, Sudan's military railway and associated infrastructure represent an early case of short-lived complex construction (Welsby 2011). Work on the railway began in 1875; it was then used mostly during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and all usable parts were disassembled and recycled during the early twentieth century. First World War fortifications were also conceived to last only for the duration of the conflict (or even a single battle), yet the investment in the frontline in terms of human, material and economic resources was greater than in most places devised to last that were created around that time. Perhaps no other phenomenon epitomises better the ephemerality of supermodern war landscapes than those created by the use of counter-measures during the Second World War (Jouannais 2012: 89). Eighty million aluminium strips were dropped in each mission by Allied bombers that transformed hundreds of square kilometres into eerie white landscapes of which virtually no record is known. "Such landscape has existed", writes Jean-Yves Jouannais with astonishment.

Indeed, there is a sort of magic in these dark ephemeral spaces, that are so intense and tangible when they exist and so unimaginable when they have vanished. And yet they are everywhere. One does not have to visit a war zone to find them. Any large construction work produces them and perhaps for that reason they are so aesthetically attractive. Let me mention a particular example. My team and I conducted salvage excavations in the island of Corisco, Equatorial Guinea, amidst a ruinous world that was meant to disappear soon (González-Ruibal 2016b), a perfect example of ruin in reverse (Smithson 2011). The works for the construction of an international airport, a harbour and hotels had been transforming

**FIGURE 7.6** Ephemeral spaces: a landscape of construction and destruction in Equatorial Guinea. Author's photograph.



(and destroying) the island for five years when we finished our fieldwork in 2012. In this period of time, some new buildings were already collapsing, unused spare parts were decaying under the tropical rain and trees and vines had invaded warehouses and barracks (Figure 7.6). Although this post-apocalyptic environment will be effaced and little of it will remain in the archaeological record once construction is finished, for several years this will have been a very real world for three hundred people—locals and workers. Of the flimsy shacks with makeshift bars, the old bus running through the dusty road with workers and islanders, and the barracks, nothing or very little will remain—a few traces of litter through the island. The industrial sensorial landscape will vanish as well: the noise of the electric generators, the trucks and bulldozers trudging through the mud, the multilingual shouts of foremen and workers, the smells of grease and oil, the couscous and the workers' sweat. This is an original society and a paradoxical landscape, because it is a living ruin, and a ruin that will exist only as long as the project is alive. When the works stop, the ruins will disappear and with them the old bus and the bars, the couscous, the archaeologists, the concrete bags and the oil puddles. The megalomaniacal development project will probably fail, as others are failing already in Equatorial Guinea. The half-ruin of the construction works allows us also to envisage another ruin which still is not.

The reverse is also true: that many spaces conceived as ephemeral end up becoming solid and durable. The best example is the Eiffel Tower, originally built for the *Exposition Universelle* of 1889 and slated for demolition afterwards. Yet even structures that are abandoned quickly, such as trenches, are ephemeral only in their original use. In regions where they are not easily backfilled, they will shape the landscape for centuries or even millennia after the end of the conflict. The same happened with the military villages of Taiwan, established during the 1940s and 1950s to host the Nationalist Army retreating from mainland China and the personnel's

relatives (Cheng and Hsieh 2013). Although they were designed as transient settlements, failure of the Nationalists to retake China transformed them into the permanent residence of the *Waishengren*, the newcomers and their descendants. Some villages have been abandoned ever since, but others have had a diversity of afterlives. The persistence of ephemeral structures is not just an issue of mere materiality and specific technologies. Not even of the deranged temporalities of the supermodern. There are important ideological reasons behind the turning permanent of the transient. Defending the temporary nature of some drastic political and economic measures has been one of the trademarks of neoliberal states: cuts in social spending or basic constitutional rights are presented as transitory in a given state of exception (financial crisis or terrorist attack). The very durable walls that separate nations, peoples and races have usually been built under pretence of being temporary (Brown 2010: 27, 31). Their materiality stands in stark contradiction with such an assumption. Hence a role for a critical archaeology of supermodern ephemerality: to expose, through material facts, the fallacies of the ephemeral.

## ■ Division and confinement

Supermodern space is often presented as fluid, transitory, boundless and dispersed—also in archaeology (McAttackney and Penrose 2016: 151). This is very much the case with the space through which commodities, middle- and high-class travellers, finances and data move, all of which exist in a seemingly limitless space. Not surprisingly, sociologists and anthropologists have focused their attention on the way in which this space of circulation has shaped modern societies and subjects (Castells 1996). At the same time, however, supermodernity has brought an extreme division and confinement to the world. An emphasis on fluidity, in fact, may lead us to forget all the material strategies of fixation and circumscription deployed by supermodern powers: movement is always controlled and often prevented. Those who move and the things that circulate have to be allowed to do so. Over the last hundred years, there has been a proliferation of what Bauman (2000: 101) calls “emic spaces”, which are those related to incarceration, deportation, state murder and social segregation. An expanding subfield within historical and contemporary archaeology, in fact, studies the ever-increasing forms of institutional confinement that have spread since the nineteenth century, including concentration, extermination and forced labour camps, prisoner-of-war camps, prisons, asylums, boarding schools for indigenous peoples, juvenile detention centres and clandestine detention centres (Casella 2007; Theune 2010, 2016; Myers 2010; Myers and Moshenska 2011; Salerno et al. 2012; Carr and Mytum 2012; McAttackney 2014; Study Colls 2015; Rosignoli 2015; Fuenzalida 2017; Mytum and Carr 2012). During the last hundred years, some forms of confinement have disappeared or have been agglutinated under the expanding category of the prison (Casella 2007: 147), whereas other institutions have emerged recently, such as immigration removal centres (Tejerizo et al. 2017). Compared to other periods, the contemporary era has seen the democratisation of imprisonment, with more and more groups liable to being confined. The two main additions of advanced modernity are communities targeted for race (Ng and Camp 2015; Benneyworth 2016) and political affiliation (González-Ruibal 2011), which are illustrative of new political anxieties developing during the nineteenth century—biological racism and the rising political consciousness of the working classes. Furthermore, the dichotomy between space of incarceration and domestic space has been blurred in many ways. Several strategies have developed since the late nineteenth century to restrict movement and enforce surveillance of free populations, as in the case of the counter-insurgency settlements in Argentina during the 1970s (Colombo 2016), or the

*reconcentraciones* in Cuba in 1896–1898 (Martí 2017) and South Africa during the Boer War of 1899–1902 (Benneyworth 2016).

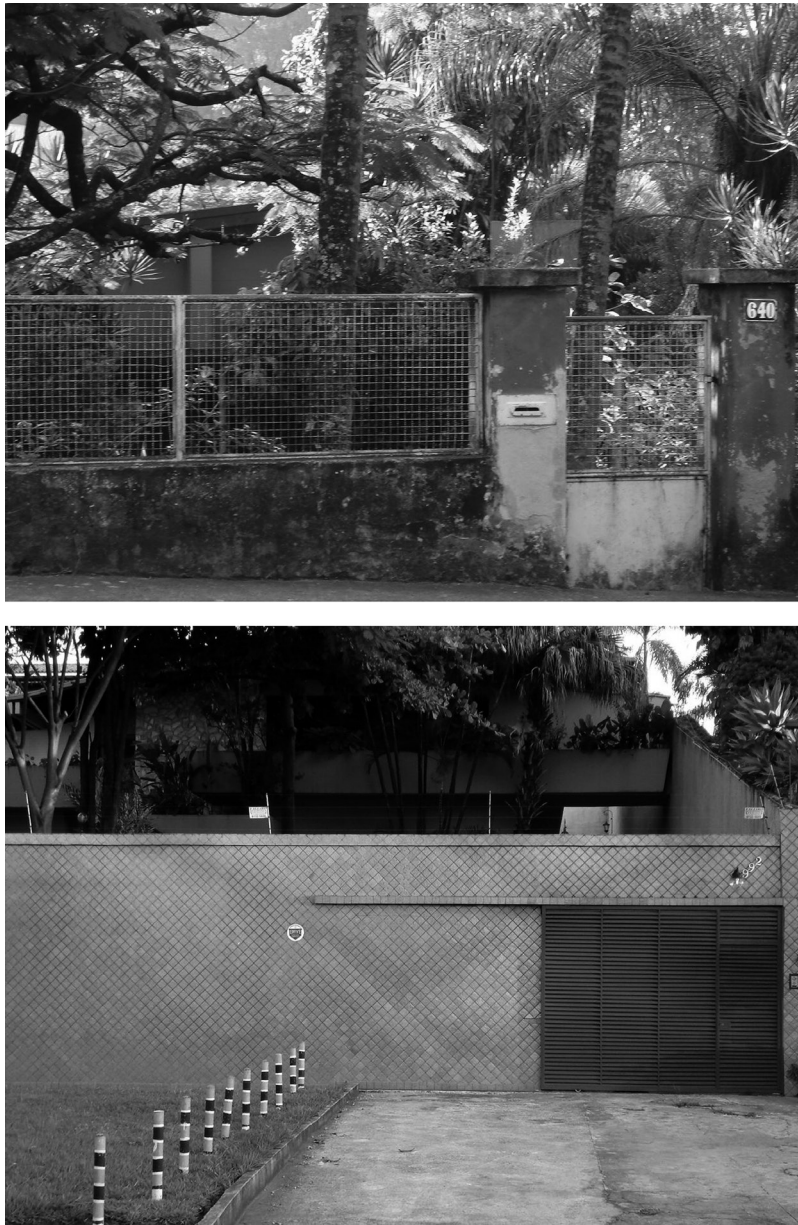
Confinement can also be voluntary. People, groups and entire countries isolate themselves behind walls. It is also during the contemporary era that the longest and most monumental barriers separating nations, regions and political systems have been built (Brown 2010: 7–18; Razac 2015: 173–175). We create more and more divisions and fortifications, both material and immaterial, which are the materialisation of the fantasy of total immunity—against external aggression, crime, disease, natural catastrophes, technical accidents, and so forth—that is part of contemporary biopolitics (Esposito 2006). Yet, as Roberto Esposito has demonstrated, the fantasy of total immunity comes with a price: allowing inside something of the evil that we intend to keep outside—violence, oppression, despotism. This has a huge political and subjective price. We defend our self with stronger psychosocial defences, because we fear the encounter with others (Elias 1978), and we do the same with our houses, neighbourhoods and countries. In fact, walls extend from homesteads to continents in a fractal way, as it happens with other supermodern material phenomena (Edgeworth 2013: 385–388). The ubiquitous walls of the contemporary era are as much a physical deterrence as a powerful ideological artefact, which plays a symbolic and psychological role through its very material existence and theatrical deployment (Brown 2010: 25). Wendy Brown has argued that the proliferation of walls during the last two decades is an index of dwindling state sovereignty more than of its power. Undermined by unrestrained neoliberalism, the state recedes and barriers become “symbols of its erosion” (Brown 2010: 24). Likewise, it can be argued that the walls surrounding gated communities are actually proof of the weakening of the very idea of community and social solidarity, and that self-centred material trappings and practices that buttress the ego ultimately represent a troubled, insecure self (Giddens 1991).

Divisions, barriers, walls are therefore anything but innocent. They create distance and distance dehumanises, by weakening our responsibility to our neighbour (Bauman 2000; see also Chapter 4). They are essential in the making of selves and Others, masters and subjects, humans, non-humans and infrahumans (Agamben 1995, 2002). Lindsay Weiss (2011), for instance, has shown how the creation of segregated labour camps in South Africa during the diamond rush played an important part in the development of equally segregated concentration camps of the Boer War (Benneyworth 2016) and the later apartheid system. Materiality is essential in this process: tall walls boost anxieties and fear; barbed wire turns people into a pack of wild animals, as seen in the border outposts of Europe (Razac 2015: 179–180, 203); concentration camps, which are used to intern racial, religious, or political Others dehumanise individuals and reinforce prejudices about the infrahumanity or expendability of other groups. It is perhaps not a coincidence, in fact, that barbed wire was born at the dawn of supermodernity (Netz 2004; Razac 2015). With internment camps, it would soon become one of its fossil guides.

Divisions, as I have pointed out, start inside the home. This is a characteristic of the early arrival of modernity in the West (Deetz 1977), but in many regions, including parts of southern and eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa and South America, indoor partitions, such as corridors, entrance halls or living rooms detached from kitchens, only become widespread during the second half of the twentieth century (González-Ruibal 2003; González-Ruibal et al. 2016; Kohn and Dawdy 2016). This is related to the “process of civilisation” (Elias 1978), the classification impetus of modernity, and the emergence of the isolated individual (Quijano 2007: 172; Hernando 2017). In fact, along with individual rooms appear individualised furniture and appurtenances, such as chairs replacing long benches and dishes replacing communal pots. Partitions shape subjectivities and can be linked to the excess of the self detected by Augé



**FIGURE 7.7** The isolated self: old and new barriers in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. Photographs by Andrés Zarankin.



as characteristic of our era (2002 [1992]). Yet perhaps more relevant is the way in which the ego establishes barriers toward the outside. This is manifested in houses, neighbourhoods and capitalist enclaves.



**FIGURE 7.8** The divided city: a street in an African American neighbourhood in Detroit cut by a freeway. Author's photograph.



The fortification of domestic space (represented best by gated communities) is a global trend starting from the mid-twentieth century (McKenzie 1994; Caldeira 1996, 2000; Geniş 2007; Penrose 2007: 34–37). Walls, fences and security systems are deployed at the same time to protect those living inside the residential enclaves, to grant social status to the residents and to draw clear symbolic distinctions between the inside and the outside, the latter often perceived as wild, disordered, dirty and dangerous (Caldeira 1996; McKenzie 2005; Geniş 2007). It has been argued that these isolated communities reverse the foundations of the modern democratic city, which is based on the collective use of public space. Archaeology has a great potential for analysing the materiality of domestic fortifications, which have been only generically considered by cultural anthropologists. Archaeologist Andrés Zarankin (2012), instead, has examined the way in which the elite houses of Belo Horizonte, a Brazilian metropolis, are physically isolated from the outside. He has detected an evolution in defensive systems, from the mid-twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first. Earlier barriers were simple fences around 80 cm tall and often visually permeable, which were replaced by more massive, physically and visually impregnable walls up to five metres high (Figure 7.7). They are often topped with barbed or razor wire and electrified fences, and incorporate new aggressive elements, such as CCTV and signs warning of dangerous dogs or armed guards. All these structures are not just physically efficient, but socially, too: they reinforce ideas of class and belonging/not belonging. Zarankin notes a similar evolution towards greater isolation in working-class homesteads, but an important difference here is what he calls “small annexes of sociability”, material features that enable

interactions between home dwellers and those that do not belong to that home. These include benches where members of the family sit to talk with neighbours, especially during weekends. The trend towards increasing isolation and more aggressive mechanisms of defence speaks about growing inequalities and sharper class distinction.

Growing inequality and class distinction also fragments the city. Social divisions have always existed in urban environments, but they have become more marked with the advent of advanced modernity. During the contemporary era, new material devices have contributed to the reinforcement of divisions. Roads, for instance, are regularly deployed to create social fractures. Since the 1930s, highways have been cutting and dividing the world, breaking apart ecosystems and isolating social groups. Expressways spare well-off citizens the sight of crossing slums or low-class neighbourhoods in the Americas and increasingly also in Europe. Social mixture, which has been increasingly hampered through modernity, becomes now impossible, even as spectacle. It is not surprising that ghetto tours are on the rise (Frenzel and Koens 2012): one must purposefully plan a trip to the slums if one wants to encounter social and material difference. Otherwise, a middle- or high-class citizen can easily remain in his or her bubble, as all spatial technologies are at the service of isolation (gated communities, malls, motorways). A particularly dramatic case is that of Detroit. The city's planners tried to mitigate the impact of high-speed expressways (whose construction started in the 1940s) in middle-class neighbourhoods, but the same zeal was not applied to African American residential areas. Quite the contrary: the construction of roads became a tool for razing slums. The Chrysler Freeway, for example, built in the 1960s, cut through a historical black neighbourhood and erased Hastings Street, a shopping area and home to more than twenty mainly black-owned jazz clubs during the 1930s (Steinmetz 2009: 765). Fragmented neighbourhoods became further marginalised and impoverished. Streets abruptly interrupted by highways in Detroit can now be read stratigraphically: the highway as a negative structure, both in physical and moral terms, that cuts across previous positive structures—streets, sidewalks and gardens, all indexes of sociality and spatial integration (Figure 7.8). Even more radical cases of urban division are those provoked by conflict: the ruins of the resort town of Varosha, in Cyprus, were caused by the partition of the island after the Turkish invasion: its 39,000 Greek inhabitants abandoned the town in 1974 and left a ghostly landscape of high-rises (Dobraszczyk 2015). Divisions rarely materialise as a thin line.

Urban divisions exist even when they do not take the form of walls or cuts. There are other material elements that work to exclude people from areas where they do not belong for class, ethnic, or racial reasons. It is a question of *amor fati*, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu. The sociologist argues, in his famously convoluted language, that “the dispositions durably inculcated by the objective conditions and by a pedagogic action that is tendentially adjusted to these conditions, tend to generate practices objectively compatible with these conditions and expectations pre-adapted to their objective demands (*amor fati*)” (Bourdieu 1990: 63). The material circumstances in which a slum dweller lives create dispositions that generate practices (including bodily attitudes and spatial practices) that are compatible with these conditions. This means that she will refrain from interacting with those places that she feels are not for her, because they contrast with her own material milieu (fancy boulevards or shopping malls, for instance). This feeling is reinforced by the urban layout, architecture, artefacts and even textures (cleanliness, colours, material density: see Chapter 8).

Colonial contexts are particular explicit when it comes to divisions. Here, physical barriers were perhaps not as important as symbolic ones. It is meaningful that Frantz Fanon began *The Wretched of the Earth* commenting on space:

The colonial world is a compartmentalized world . . . The colonist's sector is a sector built to last, all stone and steel. It's a sector of lights and paved roads . . . The colonized's sector . . . is a disreputable place inhabited by disreputable people . . . It's a world with no space, people are piled one on top of the other, the shacks squeezed tightly together.

(Fanon 2004: 3–4)

There is no need of a material wall for the division to exist, but materiality is indeed needed. In many cases, the later development of colonial towns has blurred the racial logic that underpins them. In other cases, the postcolonial city has amplified the racial logic, with class largely (but by no means completely) replacing race. The materiality of the shanty town and the materiality of the financial district and the high-class neighbourhoods in Luanda or Nairobi reproduce the colonial divides resorting to similar material devices. Most colonial powers tended to create sharp divisions between the space of the colonisers and the colonised. The French, in particular, were very enthusiastic about the dual or segregated city. In Tangier, Morocco, they created a new urban centre with large boulevards, away from the old town, which was the object of heritage preservation. The result was a stark contrast between the new city of regular concrete blocks and the dark medina of narrow and irregular alleys and mud-and-brick houses. Not only urbanism, but the materiality of the buildings themselves helped reinforce negative representations of the local community, as undeveloped and in need of Western stewardship (Van Dommelen 2006: 113–115). The Italians projected similar segregated cities in their colonies. In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the indigenous quarter was to be separated from Italian residential areas by vegetation (Fuller 1996: 405–406). The area of the government was to be established in a dominant hill. The bold discourse of fascist colonialism makes its intentions clear: the planning “should formally make evident the predominance of white over black, and visually admonish that every piazza seek our supremacy over the infantile, primitive indigenous population” (Gherardo Bosio, cited in Fuller 1996: 406). The same material divisions without physical barriers can be identified in even the smallest Italian outposts (González-Ruibal 2010). In Tanzania and Kenya, the British constructed single-storey tiled roof and stone-built cottages with bounded gardens for expatriates and densely packed blocks of houses for Africans in a tight street grid (Rhodes 2016: 96–97).

Entire towns can be separated from the surrounding area. The best cases are provided by company towns and capitalist enclaves that reproduce the logic of colonial outposts, although communist regimes also created isolated military or industrial towns (Harrison and Schofield 2010: 191; Andreassen et al. 2010; Kobiałka et al. 2015). Offshore capitalism produces small-scale self-contained universes that have their own rules and create insurmountable distances with the wider world, upon which capitalist companies intervene at the same time (Appel 2012). Archaeologist Rafael Souza (2016) has studied the effects of the establishment of a mining company town in the Carajás region in Brazil. The settlement was built in an area inhabited by the indigenous Xikrin people, whose fluid spatial logic was totally opposite to that introduced by the town—a typical modernist undertaking of disciplined urbanism and well-bounded limits. Souza argues that an archaeology of that company town is first and foremost an archaeology of conflict—not of the kind to which Western archaeologists are used, and that involves modern armies or military weapons, but a conflict between ontologies and forms of experiencing landscape (“the flow and the line”), which is, however, not free of violence. Furthermore, the modern divide is not limited to the town's fence. As with other barriers, it creates its own ecology, in this case a scatter of

**FIGURE 7.9** The divided landscape: a fort in Tindouf, forming part of the Moroccan barrier in the Western Sahara. Photograph © United Nations.



modern debris, including packaging, plastic bottles, glass, children's toys, discarded metal structures, electric lines, concrete, and even a car chassis.

What is most unique of the contemporary era is the proliferation of large-scale divisions that cut through entire regions, countries and even continents. These have existed for a long time (the Roman *limes* and the Chinese Great Wall of course come to mind), but they have become exceedingly widespread during the last hundred years. The first sharp territorial divisions were those created by the First World War. Trenches were a cheap and effective method of large-scale fortification, but they were more than that. A trench is not just a method of defence: it is also a way of buttressing notions of us and them through a heavy inscription in the landscape. It is the very old line drawn in the sand to separate two groups or two individuals (sports teams, warriors, duellists), but made at the excessive scale characteristic of supermodernity. The dehumanisation of the neighbour, which has become the trademark of the contemporary era, began in the trenches of the Great War. The enemy could hardly be seen, separated as it was by a lethal no man's land, whereas the comrades were closer than ever inside the deep ditches and small dugouts. The symbolic division of the trench was made crudely explicit after the Spanish Civil War. The victorious Nationalists set up signs along abandoned fortifications with the inscriptions "Us" (the Nationalists) and "Them" (the Republicans) (Viejo Rose 2011: 80). The prehistoric aspect of negative, earthen structures prevents us from realising how crucial they are in the contemporary era. If there is a fossil guide for the supermodern, this is the trench: an extremely simple but highly efficient spatial technology. Zigzag trenches, of the type that became widespread during the Great War, partition landscapes of conflict (open or latent) everywhere: from Paraguay



(Breithoff 2012) to Israel (Weizman 2007). Trenches were among the first material devices used to construct continental-wide barriers. But there are precedents.

The construction of the Cuban *trochas* during the first war of independence (1868–1878) can be seen as a forerunner to the supermodern macrodivision of space (Martí 2017). The *trochas* were uninterrupted lines of fortification that physically cut the island from coast to coast. They had ditches, fences and forts and their purpose was to confine enemy activities, prevent the conflict from spreading into neighbouring regions and control the territory. Similar barriers with similar purposes have been erected ever since, combining positive and negative elements. Some are well known, such as the Israeli West Bank Barrier, which is 708 kilometres long. Much less famous but much larger is the Moroccan Western Sahara Wall, which has been the object of archaeological research (Garfi 2014, forthcoming). This is a barrier made of sand berms of around two metres high and totalling around 4,000 kilometres, which are further reinforced with minefields, barbed-wire fences, dugouts, forts and other structures (Figure 7.9). Morocco has created a deeply militarised landscape to suffocate the Saharai people. Fragmenting and isolating their land has been one of the strategies employed to shatter them, although it has been unsuccessful.

Other large barriers include the Siegfried and Maginot lines and the Iron Curtain (Pollard 2014). In all cases, archaeology can provide an original insight by taking a landscape approach, which deals with the different scales at which these boundaries work. The words “wall” or “barrier” are, in fact, understatements. The German *Atlantikwall* was, to start with, not a wall at all, but a network of bunkers, pillboxes, trenches, railways, roads, bases, bridges, lighthouses, radars, workshops and depots (Carpentier and Marcigny 2014: 42). Elsewhere, real walls also entail the construction of border guard stations, checkpoints, observation towers, military camps, maintenance facilities, electric lines and roads that radically modify entire regions, disassemble old landscapes and communities, and create new ones (Rak et al. 2016). This was particularly the case with the Iron Curtain, which has been the object of several studies (Klausmeier and Schmidt 2004, 2014; McWilliams 2013), all of which have the advantage of offering a tangible, situated dimension to the study of the wall, which has all too often been imagined purely as metaphor (McWilliams 2013: 16). Apart from the typical elements, other materials (or rather, substances) were used in the making of the Iron Curtain that are not so evident, but that shaped the landscape as much as barbed wire and watch towers, if not more. Large quantities of pesticides and herbicides, for example, were used to clear the vegetation along the fence on the Czech-Austrian border and only recently has it been possible to plant trees in the toxic strip (McWilliams 2013: 147–148). The divide will be visible here for decades after the fall of communism. Archaeology is also useful in showing material divisions as ongoing processes, rather than static features, as often imagined. They grow, expand and shrink, often organically and not always following a clear military or political logic: sometimes it is the material inertia of self-organisation that may explain some of the changes. The afterlives of mass material divisions, such as the Berlin Wall, can be as complex as their former lives, with memory, heritage and commemoration adding and subtracting layers of meaning and materiality to the places (Dolff-Bonekämper 2002).

Walls do not necessarily separate countries in conflict. Anti-immigration barriers have become more common and more solid since the 1990s. Randall McGuire (2013) has been able to document changes in the size, style and morphology of the US-Mexico wall through the years. In the mid-twentieth century, the border at the locality of Ambos Nogales was a simple chain-link fence. A higher and more impregnable barrier was erected in the mid-1990s, as immigration increased. This had a more massive character and a disturbing military look. Most importantly, the wall interrupted the lines of sight between neighbours living on



**FIGURE 7.10** Crossing the wall: the mother-of-pearl cross made by Valeriu Gafencu for the woman he loved while in a communist prison in Romania. Photograph by Alexandru Dragoman.



either side and undermined the sense of community across the border. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, border security was reinforced, with the two downtown gates protected with steel doors, tire shredders, and bars “making entry into the United States feel like entering a prison” (McGuire 2013: 472). In 2011, a new bollard-style wall was constructed that was even taller and more impregnable than the previous one, while at the same time allowing people to see through it. This enables border guards to detect immigrants preparing to cross. McGuire not only studies the materialisations of division, but also the ways in which

the wall has been challenged, from street art to illicit activities. Barriers also have peripheral effects. Thus, the impact of the US-Mexico border wall can be materially tracked many kilometres beyond the boundary itself: the stronger surveillance of the border has led tens of thousands of migrants to take lengthy and dangerous detours, where they abandon and lose things (often personal possessions), if not life itself (De León 2013, 2015).

So far, I have referred to divisions that are expressed horizontally. But vertical divisions are not less important in the contemporary era. Vertical geopolitics, using Stephen Graham's (2004) apt term, have existed since the time of the pyramids and ziggurats, but they have acquired a new dimension with supermodern technologies. The vertical dimension now goes well beyond the earth's surface (Graham 2004: 18). Vertical divisions separate different levels of agency—powerful states commanding the sky and outer space with airplanes, satellites and drones, versus guerrillas, terrorists and powerless civilians gone underground. But these divisions also separate classes—luxurious high-rises versus shanty towns. In many cases, caves have become the last resource for survival, either for economic or purely physical reasons, thus bringing together the supermodern and the Paleolithic. People have reconstructed their lives underground, reproducing the organisation of domestic space above ground (Esterhuysen 2010; González-Ruibal et al. 2011b; Kiernan 2012: 229; Moshenska 2013b: 120–131; Carpentier and Marcigny 2014: 99–105).

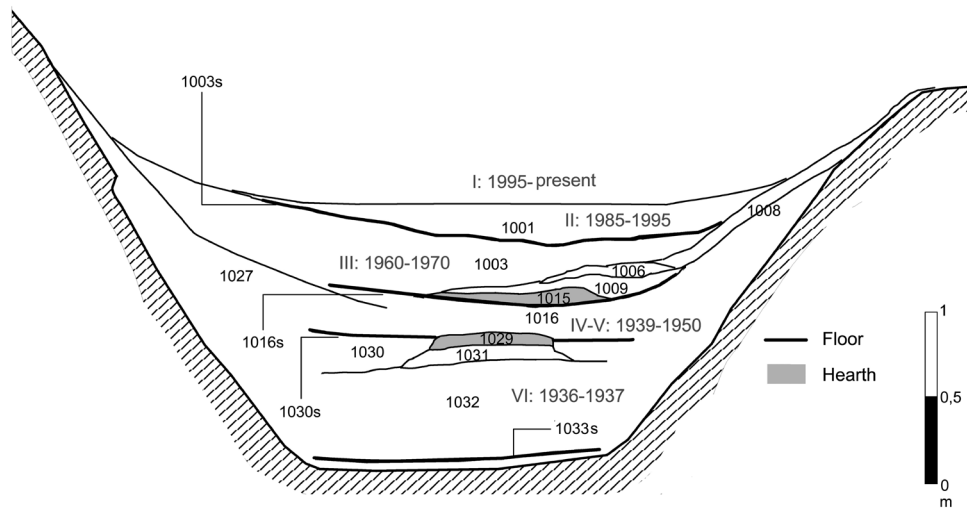
Throughout this section, I have insisted in the potential of archaeology to document the agency of physical forms of deterrence and division, how they create and shape subjects. Yet this is only one of the possibilities offered by the discipline. Just as important is the study of the ways in which emic spaces are counteracted through a variety of active or passive acts of resilience and resistance: escape tunnels (Doyle et al. 2007; López Mazz 2009; Theune 2016: 86), prison graffiti (Ballesta and Rodríguez Gallardo 2008), art on defensive walls and barriers (Parry 2011; McGuire 2013; Garfi 2014), artefacts created by prisoners or manipulated by them in subversive ways (Casella 2007; López Mazz 2009; Carr and Mytum 2012; Dragoman 2015; Theune forthcoming). While tunnels enable the actual transgression of barriers by facilitating escape, graffiti, art and artefacts challenge division and confinement in the realm of imagination, which is at least as important. They are a way of preventing the dissolution of the ego and of collective identities (ethnic, political, religious) and the reproduction of a “latent social life” (Theune forthcoming).

Objects made by the prisoners as gifts to relatives and loved ones also break barriers by connecting those that are inside with those that are outside. Valeriu Gafencu died in a communist prison in Romania in 1952. Before passing away, he made a small cross in mother-of-pearl (Figure 7.10). He never left the prison, but the cross did and reached Elisabeta, the woman he loved. The cross was designed to be worn around the neck, in direct contact with the body. The spatial division and the distance between bodies and minds imposed by the prison were thus twice transgressed. Or perhaps thrice: Valeriu died, while the object he made has continued to bear his love for Elisabeta—to the present day (Dragoman 2015: 143–145).

## Waste

The production of hegemonic space inevitably creates waste space. With this category, I refer to all forms of redundant, marginal and empty spaces. Supermodernity is a great producer of wastelands, which tend to remain out of focus: they are the slums around a tourist resort or a gated community, the roadside where an indigenous community lives after being expelled from their land, the vacant lot temporarily occupied by homeless people. These spaces are

**FIGURE 7.11** The depth of waste space: sequential homeless occupations in a shelter from the Spanish Civil War—University City, Madrid. Author's drawing.



often referred to as non-places. Since Marc Augé used the concept to refer to airports, malls, highways and other hegemonic spaces of capitalism, I think that it is better to avoid using the word in this case. There are others that are more appropriate.

Zygmunt Bauman (2004: 98–104) has talked of empty and leftover places, which are produced by political processes of marginalisation and exclusion. In Britain, a term that has enjoyed some success is that of “edgelands” (Farley and Roberts 2012). Edgelands usually refer to “disorderly interstitial spaces” in between town and countryside (Martin 2014: 1108–1111). Although some of them match the concept of non-place (sewage plants, landfills, shopping centres and motorway service stations), others tally well with the notion of leftover place. This can be the case of empty stretches of land that are used for discarding rubbish, abandoning old bicycles, walking dogs, etc. (Martin 2014: 1110). Like modern ruins (Edensor 2005; Hudson 2014), they are not subjected to processes of material ordering and sanitisation or symbolic appropriation, and are characterised by a dense materiality of waste. These interstitial spaces, however, are seldom really empty. They are occupied in different ways by a variety of subalterns, such as homeless people, scrap dealers and migrants (Zimmerman et al. 2010; Singleton 2017). They are also used sporadically by teenagers and youngsters (Edensor 2005).

Architect de Solà-Morales (1995) used the concept of *terrain vague* to refer to empty, but promising spaces. *Vague* refers to vacuum, void, but also unoccupied, free, available, indeterminate, blurred. As such, *terrain vague* can be seen as the space of the possible and of expectation (de Solà-Morales 1995: 26–27). For its utopian qualities, it can be related to Derrida’s ambiguous notion of *khôra*, which is something uncertain, without meaning and essence, an indeterminate receptacle, apparently empty, but definitely not emptiness itself—a place of hospitality and a shelter (Derrida 2011). Yet not all empty land is freely available. The work of artist Lara Almarcegui (Ramírez Blanco 2012) reminds us that much *terrain vague* is actually owned and fenced off. Part of her work consists in “openings” that seek to fulfil the public potential of these empty spaces. She manages to make the vacant lots accessible from a day to several years.

The ultimate goal is to protect them from speculation and achieve a durable redemption. For that, she needs to know the places in depth, including their history. In her projects, it is important that she remains as long as possible in the places so as to reclaim them. The analogy with the work of archaeology is obvious. Both Lara Almarcegui and archaeologists spend time in places that often look uninteresting or empty. They develop intimate relations with them and strive for their protection against economic and other interests. In that, both the artist and the archaeologist subvert the time of fast capitalism when trying to transform the ephemeral into the durable. Almarcegui imagines cities shot through with a constellation of gaps, liberated lots that make up a sort of “fragmented land of the commons” (Ramírez Blanco 2012: 239).

Archaeology has an important role to play in the exploration of *terrain vague* and waste space more generally. It can work in two directions: it can historicise the *terrain vague* and describe its geomorphology. Regarding the first topic, waste space is usually seen as ahistorical, but this is often untrue. Swanepoel (2016: 14), for instance, has noted that many urban areas in Africa that are described as informal or slum areas are by now quite old and may have heritage significance. Likewise, places occupied by homeless people may become a locus for memory practices and be involved in the production of relations and identities (Zimmerman et al. 2010; Crea et al. 2014). Few studies on homelessness have explored the phenomenon beyond the present. To take a long-term look is difficult, but not impossible: I recently have had the chance to document a sequence of eighty years of homeless occupation in the *terrain vague* of the University City of Madrid. In forgotten corners of the campus, we were able to find traces of the lives of a diversity of marginalised communities, from homosexuals to undocumented migrants and folk artists. In some cases, successive occupations in the same places have produced surprisingly deep stratigraphies (Figure 7.11).

The geomorphology of *terrain vague* is another topic amenable to archaeological scrutiny. De Landa (1997: 258) has famously used a geological approach to human history, describing bodies and minds as “coagulations or decelerations of flows of biomass, genes, memes, and norms”, which are comparable to the geological processes of the mineral world, where every part can “be defined simply by specifying its chemical composition and its speed of flow: very slow for rocks, faster for lava”. Thus, De Landa (1997: 27–28) considers that the emergence of cities can be seen as a process of mineralisation, the creation of an urban exoskeleton, akin to the bones that form the human endoskeleton. This exoskeleton has undergone changes during the last few thousand years—such as its metallisation during the late eighteenth century (De Landa 1997: 81), which have regulated the motion of things, people and ideas. Despite the Deleuzian interest in flows, De Landa does not mention alluvium among the geological phenomena involved in shaping world history. This is probably because unlike lava, alluvium does not solidify—but is the key geological force in interstitial spaces. Like De Landa, I am not using the term in a metaphorical sense; rather, I argue that leftover spaces often literally work as sedimentary traps. They interrupt the flux of waste materiality and humanity that circulate in any inhabited environment. They capture and concentrate part of this waste, which then sediments in different ways.

Any vacant lot provides good evidence of this geomorphological process. The University City of Madrid, however, furnishes a particularly illustrative case. During the Spanish Civil War, the campus, which had been built on a Pleistocene terrace of the Manzanares River, was crisscrossed with trenches and dugouts. Most of them were backfilled or built over after 1939, but some survived in marginal areas. After the war, the remaining trenches acted as sedimentary traps: they were gradually filled with alluvium (clay, sand and thin gravel, mixed with anthropogenic debris) coming from the draining of the terrace’s slopes. Yet they also acted

as traps for other kinds of alluvium, social in this case: the marginalised collectives to which I have referred above. The forces that move social alluvium are political and economic, but the dynamics themselves are not different from the geological ones. Interestingly, the word “alluvium” in Spanish is used to refer both to the geological phenomenon and to a mass of people. Social and material alluvium sediment also in other empty spaces, like the deserts crossed by migrants entering the United States: the deposits studied by De León (2012, 2013, 2015) can be accurately described with the language of alluvial processes. He has used the archaeological concept of “use wear” to refer to traces left in material culture through repeated use and modification. Many of these traces (wear patterns) have to do with friction and movement: worn-out shoes, for example, that have been repaired during the journey. They can be compared to geological materials eroded through alluvial dynamics. The use of the vocabulary of the natural sciences should not be seen as a depoliticisation of space. Rather, it is intended not just to understand the formation processes of the archaeological record, but to visualise inequalities: while most attention is put on mineralisation (De Landa 1997), which is related to the dominant classes, alluvium, the geological process that shapes the lives of subaltern classes, has elicited much less interest among historians, art historians and archaeologists.

The fact that empty place can become a space of experimentation and hope, as de Solà-Morales pointed out, should not lead us to forget why spaces are empty or have become redundant in the first place. There is a political economy of the *terrain vague* that has to be examined. Emptiness has been historically produced by different kinds of violence (physical and symbolic). I have already referred to the ethnic, racial and political cleansing that left vast swathes of land depopulated and in ruins in the Czech Republic, Poland, Rwanda, South Africa, or the United States (Chapter 2 and 6). Other empty landscapes are produced by less brutal, but also tragic, reasons: the shrinking cities of the American Rust Belt are also marked by gaps and empty spaces produced by deindustrialisation, suburbanisation and demographic change (Weaver et al. 2017: 57–58), themselves caused by economic and political factors (including racism). Emptiness here is not just the end result of such processes: it actually provokes further poverty, abandonment and marginalisation through negative feedback (Weaver et al. 2017: 49–50).

One of the best cases of urban waste space produced by violence is that of Berlin. The metropolis never recovered its pre-war population figures and empty lots are a testimony to the vicissitudes of the twentieth century. Despite large reconstruction and building projects after reunification, the capital still had one million fewer citizens in 2010 than it had at the eve of the Second World War. Here, half-bombed blocks have been appropriated by a diversity of communities of resistance, from artists to anarchists (e.g. Sandler 2016: 66–70). Maintaining the partial emptiness and dereliction of the buildings has been used as a way of keeping the conflicted history of the city alive and of reacting against its gentrification and commodification: “We believe that people must live with their own past, and for us this includes even Fascism”, argue one of the residents in a bombed building (Sandler 2016: 70). *Terrain vague* can be a territory of utopia and of traumatic memory at the same time.

## ■ Deep mapping

Throughout this chapter, I have offered a critical overview of supermodern spatialities. I would like to end here on a more positive note by asking: what can we as archaeologists do to redress the impoverishment, waste and destruction of space? The idea that space has been



simplified and disenchanted by modernity is widespread in the arts. Surrealists and Dadaists were the first to develop interventions geared toward the rediscovery of landscapes that had become dull and predictable: walking was the preferred method and the city the main focus. Similar strategies were deployed by situationists in the 1950s and 1960s and by different artists ever since (Careri 2013). What the avant-garde discovered was that the exotic is at our fingertips. It is enough to get lost and explore one's own city (Careri 2013: 80). This they do not by visiting well-worn historic and artistic landmarks, but places chosen haphazardly or that are a priori uninteresting. It is the artistic walkabout and the artist's gaze that bestow a new meaning to places. This is the gist of Robert Smithson's famous tour of the "Monuments of Passaic" (2011 [1967]), which inaugurated a new genre in American photography characterised by the eerie, often minimalist documentation of unremarkable familiar landscapes. Members of this school include Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, John Schott and Catherine Opie among others (Reilly 2001; Salvesen 2009). In Europe, Gabriele Basilico's accurate portrayals of urban non-places and industrial wastelands share similar concerns and methodologies (Basilico and Boeri 1997). In these cases, the artistic gaze reveals something of the profoundly disturbing and alienating nature of the supermodern city.

Yet a closer look at apparently uninteresting places can reveal something beautiful and promising as well, as we see in the case of *terrain vague*. Writer Robert MacFarlane (2012) resorts to walking as an aesthetic practice, but his desire is not to find beauty or surprise in the unseen sordid side of mundane life, but rather the fascinating alterity in the quotidian, and, in line with archaeology, the manifold times that percolate on the surfaces of the present. He suggests the concept of "xenotopias" to refer to this discovery of difference without the need for long displacement (MacFarlane 2012: 78; also Farley and Roberts 2012). Most of his walks in fact take place in Britain and he does not cover long distances. His walk is slow and deep. In that, it approaches the practice of field walking that is essential to archaeology. When we do intensive survey, we do not move much in space, but by walking slowly and seeing carefully, things manifest themselves: an archaeological epiphany. Space unfolds and expands before us, under our feet. Our walk counteracts the spatial simplification of supermodernity, its tendency to flatten out and compress. And then space becomes landscape again, replete with things, meanings, memories, experiences—also troubling ones. The emptiest wasteland conceals untold stories and affects. Yet walking is just one of the practices that we have for re-enchanting the landscape. We can document other surfaces and unravel other secrets by simply standing: we can document changes in the façade of a building, graffiti, inscriptions that may have passed unnoticed (Graves-Brown and Schofield 2011).

Furthermore, important as they are (Harrison 2011), surfaces and walking do not exhaust the potential of contemporary archaeology. We can dig. Excavations also give density to non-places or leftover spaces as we have seen throughout this book: excavations under a parking lot, for example, reveal a vibrant African American community in Indianapolis (Mullins 2006, 2017). There is a contrast here between the homogeneous and ahistorical surface of the supermodern parking lot, which resists all inscriptions of history in its skin, and the rich pasts that it seals.

All archaeological practices that re-enchant space, by adding density, depth, meaning and mystery—(e.g. Byrne 2013; Dawdy 2016)—can be considered forms of deep mapping. The concept of the deep map was first coined by travel writer William Least Heat-Moon in 1991 in a detailed account of a county in Kansas, and then reinterpreted by performer Mike Pearson and archaeologist Michael Shanks in several works (Pearson and Shanks 2001). According to Michael Shanks:

The deep map attempts to record and represent the grain and patina of place through juxtapositions and interpenetrations of the historical and the contemporary, the political and the poetic, the discursive and the sensual; the conflation of oral testimony, anthology, memoir, biography, natural history and everything you might ever want to say about a place.

(Bailey and Shanks 2006: 9)

Both Pearson and Shanks relate deep mapping to the concept of “chorography” (Pearson 2007; Shanks 2012), an ancient genre that provided thick descriptions of regions (*khôra*), place by place, village by village, without necessarily relating them to the larger geographies to which they belonged. The genre was later retaken by early modern antiquarians and travellers, who were not so much interested in the accurate geometric mapping of space, but in the relationship between place, person and event, between past and present: their focus was topology, not topography (Shanks 2012: 100). We can then argue that what the Dadaists did in the 1920s was reinvent and expand a very old genre, a spatial practice aimed at re-imagining the world through perambulation.

Yet the key is not so much how we approach the world (walking, standing, crouching, digging, watching, drawing), but the fact that such an approach implies two things: a sensuous involvement with matter (Edgeworth 2012; Pétursdóttir 2012), and a slow temporality. The lack of both in many scholarly and popular engagements with modern ruins is what renders them so similar to each other and often superficial: Varosha could be Detroit could be Prora. Supermodern spaces of ruination are but a blank slate to inscribe theoretical categories—metaphor, allegory, heterotopia, dystopia, the sublime. The slow temporality of archaeological work, instead, resembles that of ecology. By spending time in the same place, biologists allow the world to shine in all its complexity, to reveal its secrets, its deep connections and rhythms. Only by spending time in a place, archaeologists see the world unfolding, the tiny scratches on a wall, the subtle difference between two strata, a patch of different colour on a pathway or a small concentration of broken brick and tiles. Only by spending time in a place do we come to hear stories and legends from neighbours and passers-by and see how they use the place (Hamilakis 2011), how they are tied to it, or repelled by it. There is not much methodological difference here between contemporary and other archaeologies. What is specific of contemporary archaeology is the way in which this deep engagement changes our perception of the familiar world—a world that has often become so dull and predictable, as vanguard artists bemoaned. As a student and later professor at the University of Madrid, I came to see the campus as one of the least interesting spaces of the city: too recent, the architecture too unmemorable, the parks too empty of historical traces. After three months of fieldwork I now see the campus as an enchanted space of almost mythical dimensions. As if surveys and excavations would have turned a flat, empty surface into a broken landscape of chasms and mountains, or perhaps a labyrinth, where stories, times and people meet in unexpected ways.

## Summary

Our era is one of space excess. There is no place that has not been reached by humans and modified in one way or the other. By documenting debris and material traces, archaeology bears witness to the increasing extension of anthropogenic space, from the Arctic to Antarctica. At the same time that it expands, supermodernity impoverishes both topography and spatial

experiences. By impoverishment I have referred here to the material simplification of physical space made possible by supermodern technologies, which has social, psychological and cultural consequences. An impoverished space—flattened out, stretched, regimented—prevents unexpected encounters (with other people and with different pasts).

Ephemerality is another defining characteristic of supermodern spatiality, which has been abundantly studied by archaeologists. We work with subaltern communities that construct short-lived spaces for living or acting in the world. Yet this should not make us forget that ephemerality is also a characteristic of accelerated capitalism: even the most solid structures can be planned as ephemeral—for speculation or because they will be used only for a brief period of time (as happens with war infrastructures). Ephemerality also characterises much of the architecture of political violence deployed during the last hundred years, such as clandestine detention centres and extermination camps.

The camps, in fact, epitomise the darkest side of supermodern spatiality, which is related to division and confinement. Although mobility and flux have often been celebrated, they have their flip side in ever-growing barriers, walls and all sorts of material boundaries. I have argued that spatial division works at a fractal scale, reproducing similar anxieties and a desire of immunity from the individual to the nation-state. Archaeology can contribute to the debate on divisions by examining the material infrastructure of walls, which are seldom a simple line.

Hegemonic spaces have elicited much attention among social scientists. But their production inevitably entails the generation of debris—waste space. I have used Bauman's concept of leftover places and de Solà-Morales's *terrain vague* to try to capture at the same time the abject and promising qualities of marginal or interstitial places. These are often seen as ahistorical, but archaeology can work to reveal the historicity of the *terrain vague* and perhaps construct an alternative history of the city, in which gaps and voids tell stories of trauma and marginalisation, but also endurance and promise.

I have used the concept of space throughout, instead of landscape, which is more common in archaeology and anthropology, to better capture the spatial effects of the supermodern era. In particular, I would prefer to escape the unavoidable positive connotations of the concept of landscape and its many derivatives. This chapter, however, ends on a more positive note. In an era characterised by the impoverishment of spatial experience, I wonder: how can we re-enchant the world again? How can we recover some of its density and mysteriousness, its lost placeness? I suggest that archaeological practices such as mapping, fieldwalking and digging may offer a way forward.

# 8

## Materiality

**M**ATERIALITY HAS BEEN a key concept in the social sciences for almost two decades now (Olsen 2003, 2010; Olsen et al. 2012; Hodder 2012; Witmore 2014). The current concern with materiality is inseparable from the feeling that things are overpowering us, that they are out of control—be it carbon dioxide or nuclear weapons. Indeed, much of the literature on things emphasises their autonomy and indifference in relation to human beings (Bogost 2012; Morton 2013; Pétursdóttir 2013). This turn to things comes after two decades in which the immaterial, fluidity and virtuality have called the tune (Castells 1996). Capital flow, fast consumption, new media and intercontinental travel give the impression that we are living a dematerialised existence. Bauman (2000: 113–118), for instance, talks about the shift from a “heavy” to a “light modernity”. Even those who have things as their main concern, tend to emphasise how technologies become progressively lighter, intangible, or invisible. This is the case with Oliver Razac’s political analysis of barbed wire (Razac 2015): he talks about the virtualisation of technologies of power and control from the late nineteenth century to the present. Barbed wire would have been the first stage of material thinning: from stone walls to hardly visible wire fences. In a similar vein, Buchli (2010) considers that power needs less and less materiality to be effective. This is no doubt the case, but is supermodernity truly that light? I would contend that, on the contrary, society has never been heavier and that to consider it light conceals the material foundations of supermodernity. It is not that the idea of liquid modernity is unhelpful; the problem is that the metaphor can lead us to forget both the true weight of our present time and that the weight of the world is not equally distributed (Hodder 2014; Hornborg 2017). There are some regions where supermodernity is heavier than in others—hazardous waste and polluting factories have been displaced to China, Bangladesh, or Ghana. The West not only outsources industries, it also outsources its rubbish.

Studies on new media, the hyperspace, the production and circulation of images and new technologies—which also have an archaeological dimension (Harrison 2009; Piccini 2015)—may obscure both the material effects of the virtual and everything that does not fit social representations of supermodern technologies (Lemonnier 1992). Ian Hodder (2014) notes that terms like the “cloud” or the “web” make us think that they are light or insubstantial, but they require enormous amounts of electricity, which is largely produced in fossil-fuel power stations—a typical example of very heavy, highly polluting modernity. War is also represented today as a videogame or a movie that seems to occur only on a screen (de Landa 1991; Virilio 2005). Yet the combat gear of modern infantry is not lighter than that of Greek hoplites (Olsen 2012: 177). American soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq carry loads of between 45.5 and 54.5 kilos (Orr 2010: 77): their body armour alone can weigh up to 15 kilos. And it does not matter how light a military drone is or that it is operated remotely, its effects are still strongly material and situated: blasted walls and burnt vehicle carcasses in Yemen, Pakistan and Palestine (Forensic Architecture/SITU Research 2014). Archaeology,

like forensic architecture, can be a counterbalance to the generalised perception of the world as plastic, ethereal, or purely discursive (Olsen 2003; González-Ruibal 2008: 252–254).

In this chapter, I would like to explore some of the characteristics that define the materiality of the contemporary era. This includes the proliferation of things—but also the deprivation suffered by large masses of people all over the world, the emergence and generalisation of monstrous things (defined on ontological, physical, or moral grounds), the overabundance of waste, and the diversity of atmospheres that still define the contemporary world.

## ■ Proliferation and deprivation

The sheer amount of existing human-made things is one of the characteristics of the contemporary era and perhaps the one that is more immediately evident. The amount of stuff that is produced, consumed and discarded in the West has no parallel in history. A recent study of the material culture of the Mursi people of southern Ethiopia catalogued the totality of artefacts of that group, which amounted to 150 different things (including a few industrial ones, such as metal pots and Kalashnikovs) (Salazar Bonet 2017). This number would probably not even account for the different objects that one can find in a Western toilet. A Mursi can name each and every object that she encounters in her daily life. We cannot, as a visit to a mall or a hardware store should make obvious. There are so many things around that there has been a *décalage* between our capacity to produce things and our capacity to name them (Baudrillard 1968: 162). Bjørnar Olsen (2010: 9) has noted that the trajectory from Olduvai Gorge to the postmodern world is one of more and more tasks being delegated to things. This is definitely the case and it is not just that we have found ways of having things performing tasks for us; there are also political and economic reasons for the current situation. New technologies, new materials, mass industrial production, higher standards of living and skyrocketing demographics are inseparable from the logic of capitalism and the rationality of modernity: they have all contributed to a material excess with no parallel in the history of humankind.

This is a highly problematic excess, with dramatic ecological consequences—but also social and psychological. The size of the problem is captured by artists like Edward Burtynsky, Andreas Gursky and Jeff Wall, all of whom symptomatically resort to large images to better convey the excessive materiality of the contemporary world (Szeman and White 2009; Witmore forthcoming a)—but Godfrey Reggio had already managed to convey something of the inhuman proliferation of artefacts and hyperobjects in his documentary film *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982). This is experienced by many of us daily: in our houses packed with things, many of which we rarely use, in the generalisation of self-storage units, in the ephemeral artefacts that we discard or recycle every day, often several times a day (styrofoam cups, plastic wrapping, boxes, glass bottles). The view from the landfill, which is inherently an archaeological view (Rathje and Murphy 1992), bears testimony of this monstrous excess. This is perhaps even more so in the case of people with Diogenes syndrome, where home and dump have become one and the same. But we do not need to go to a landfill to meet the material excess of our age. Þóra Pétursdóttir describes her feelings of impotence when she explores the abandoned herring factories of Iceland:

everywhere floors are covered with things, broken, crumbled or pulverized. No matter where you turn you will turn to things. A mixed feeling of wonder, excitement and despair overtakes you; what is this, what do I do with it—and how can I possibly account for it?

(Pétursdóttir 2012: 582–583)



Not all artefactual proliferation can be directly pinned on capitalism. Communist regimes tried to copy the staggering production rates of capitalist countries and they often surpassed them in certain aspects, especially when it comes to military artefacts: between 400,000 and 800,000 bunkers were constructed in Albania between the late 1960s and 1986 (Glass 2016: 146). Modernity and the development of the self are also strongly related to material proliferation. Table manners offer a good illustration (Elias 1978): before the nineteenth century and in some places well into the twentieth, most people in Europe had enough with a pot, a ladle, a bowl and a spoon (or not even a spoon) to serve and eat their meals. A century later, tablecloths, napkins, cutlery, diverse crockery (dishes, tureens, platters, serving trays) and different kinds of glasses, cups and jars became common at the table (Pounds 1992: 274–279). We need more things because capitalism needs us to need them: according to Baudrillard (1968: 282), consumption is a purely idealistic practice, which has nothing to do anymore with the satisfaction of needs or the principles of reality, whereas Mumford sees in the modern individual “an automaton within a larger system of automation, condemned to compulsory consumption, as he was once condemned to compulsory production” (Mumford 1966: 315). In fact, we also need things because they are essential in shaping our self (Miller 1987) and in maintaining ontological security in a time of growing life options (Giddens 1991).

Whatever the sphere of consumption, archaeology attests to the overabundance of things and the continuous production of novelty in different ways. The increasing amount of stuff that is incorporated into the geological and archaeological record can be documented spatially (Carpenter and Wolverton 2017; Souza 2017) and stratigraphically (Rathje and Murphy 1992: 92–96; Edgeworth 2014b; Zalasiewicz et al. 2016). In the long archaeological sequence documented in Heping Dao, Taiwan, from the Neolithic to the twentieth century, the impact of material culture during the Japanese and subsequent period (1896 to the present) was incomparably larger than at any time before (Berrocal et al. 2017). The sudden proliferation of things is particularly evident in colonial contexts where modernity and mass-produced objects made a swift appearance during the Age of Empire or immediately before: in Senegal, an “explosive increase” of imported artefacts is detected during the last two hundred years (Richard 2015b: 250, 2015a: 456–458) and the same happens in Southern and Central Africa (Weiss 2015; González-Ruibal et al. 2016).

Where the excess of things is more manifest is in landscapes of war. It can be argued that First World War battlefields became the places where the capitalist dream of almost infinite production and consumption was realised—with a vengeance. The war of *matériel* consumed staggering quantities of things. The impression, characteristic of consumer society, of an infinite amount of material goods at our disposal for ridiculous prices is not different, in the last instance, to the experience of soldiers fighting in the trenches, who were continuously supplied with cartridges, artillery shells and food rations—in this case for free. Furthermore, it can be argued that the nineteenth-century promise, made at world fairs, of an “unparalleled surplus”, a “profusion of things” that would overrun entire countries (Richards 1990: 120) would only materialise in practice during war; not as ordinary consumer goods, but as high explosive and bullets. Archaeological work in modern war contexts transmits very well this impression of extreme abundance and enormous waste (Saunders 2007; Desfossés et al. 2008; Osgood and Brown 2009; Schnitzler et al. 2013; Olsen and Witmore 2014; Jensen and Krause 2014; González-Ruibal 2016a) (Figure 8.1). The military dumps of modern conflicts are filled with tons of artefacts, some of them still usable, such as glass bottles, spare parts and ammunition (Desfossés et al. 2008: 47–48; Mellinger 2011: 100–101; Schnitzler et al. 2013: 183–193; Carpentier and Marcigny 2014: 82; González-Ruibal 2016a: 148–149). The proliferation of

**FIGURE 8.1** The violent proliferation of things: Italian military debris in Salya, Ethiopia—bullets, cartridges, magazines, batteries, straps, caps. Even today, the site can only be reached after a 32-kilometre walk. Author's photograph.



things does not just mean people consuming more stuff, but also people being consumed by things—this is what has provoked the ecological anxieties concerning landfills and waste (Rathje and Murphy 1992). The idea can be more or less metaphorical in general, but in the battlefield is almost literal: one is annihilated by mass-produced artefacts dispensed in unimaginable quantities. That the proliferation of things cannot be dissociated from mass destruction is something we now know well, in the current climate of ecological crisis, but it became painfully obvious in the battlefields of 1914–1918.

Identifying the totality of artefacts that make up the archaeological record of the twentieth and twenty-first century is difficult and this is another indication of the material excess of the contemporary era. It is paradoxical that, as an archaeologist working in both prehistoric and contemporary contexts, I find more trouble recognising the material culture from my own era in my own country than that of a remote age in a remote location: I cannot classify immediately a considerable percentage of the industrially produced stuff that I dig up in twentieth-century contexts in Spain. It is not surprising, for instance, that the Garbage Project had to devise careful typological analyses of modern artefacts, such as pull tabs (Rathje and Murphy 1992: 25–27). The abundance of material culture has important mnemonic consequences: the more we produce, the more we forget. And we have to forget in order to consume more and more carelessly (Connerton 2009).

Yet we should be careful about generalising the idea that there is simply more stuff out there than ever. As with many other phenomena, the extant amount of things diverges from

place to place. It is out of the question that there are more artefacts in the average contemporary home in Germany or Australia than there was in those same places a thousand years ago. But this is not necessarily the case everywhere. We have to remember that capitalism also produces impoverishment, so there is not a neat progressive line of material accumulation: there are ups and downs, and it is specific classes, races and ethnic groups that usually suffer more the downs in the form of material deprivation (Orser 2011; Spencer-Wood and Matthews 2011). As we have seen already, African Americans have often lost acquisitive power and therefore their ability to purchase more stuff during the last hundred years (Mullins 2006; Praetzelis et al. 2007). In the United States, and elsewhere, there are also now cities that have fewer houses rather than more—Detroit is the paradigmatic example (Weaver et al. 2017)—and the same occurs with many depopulated rural areas. Impoverishment can be seen archaeologically both in the ruination and abandonment of buildings, dwindling house inventories (Souza 2017) and in the reuse, recycling and curation of the available goods (Spencer-Wood and Matthews 2011: 6; Reilly, M. C. 2016: 329–332). Also, modern poverty often means that some objects proliferate (such as alcohol bottles), whereas others are absent or diminish.

We have to bear in mind also that the global order of coloniality and extractive capitalism has been making areas of the world poorer from the late fifteenth century onwards and therefore reducing, rather than increasing, the total amount of things available. This has visible material consequences. In Equatorial Guinea, archaeology shows that local people had more things and more varied during the first half of the nineteenth century than during the twentieth and twenty-first, as a result of the colonisation process (González-Ruibal 2015: 437–440). Also in Africa, some Gumuz communities in Ethiopia have now fewer things than they used to have two decades ago; paradoxically, those who accessed the cash economy during the 1990s by renting land to other groups have now smaller houses and fewer possessions (even if the amount of industrial artefacts has increased) than those that remained in remote areas clinging to more traditional forms of life. This was due to the fact that modernisation brought also social disruption, alcoholism and violence: an important percentage of the revenues went into buying alcohol and weapons (González-Ruibal 2014a: 103). In the Caatinga, a semi-arid zone in north-east Brazil traditionally inhabited by poor peasants, Rafael Souza (2017) has documented an striking process of material decrease: as the peasants entered the world of capital and modern society, their marginalisation increased and their limited access to industrial consumer goods did not make up for the disappearance of traditional artefacts. The introduction of industrial products led to a loss of know-how, traditional tools stopped being produced and the general number of things present in peasant houses fell significantly (Souza 2017: 182–184).

In many places of the global South, therefore, the arrival of modernity does not mean more stuff, but less, and what appears in its wake is even less varied. Material worlds are often drastically undermined as traditional knowledges are lost, old religious paraphernalia destroyed, and a few industrial objects replace several previous functions. Crucial here is that people stop being materially independent: in most nonmodern societies, any homestead is able to build their own houses (in collaboration with neighbours), make their own furniture and clothing and produce their own food. These endeavours require a variety of tools and skillsets. It is enough to take a look at any monograph of traditional material culture in Africa to see how much is being lost with the advent of modernity (cf. Hahn 2003). At the same time, we should not immediately equate overabundance of mass-produced goods with Western locations. Many coastal places in Atlantic Africa were overbrimming with industrial products produced in Europe in the nineteenth century (DeCorse 2001), whereas many rural areas in Europe saw a noticeable influx of modern artefacts only after the mid-twentieth century.

This is the case in eastern European countries, such as Bulgaria, Greece, or Romania, where traditional houses, clothing, agricultural implements, pottery and many other things were only replaced by industrial products very slowly during the first decades of the last century (Stavrianos 1963: 204–205; Zidarov and Grębska-Kulow 2013).

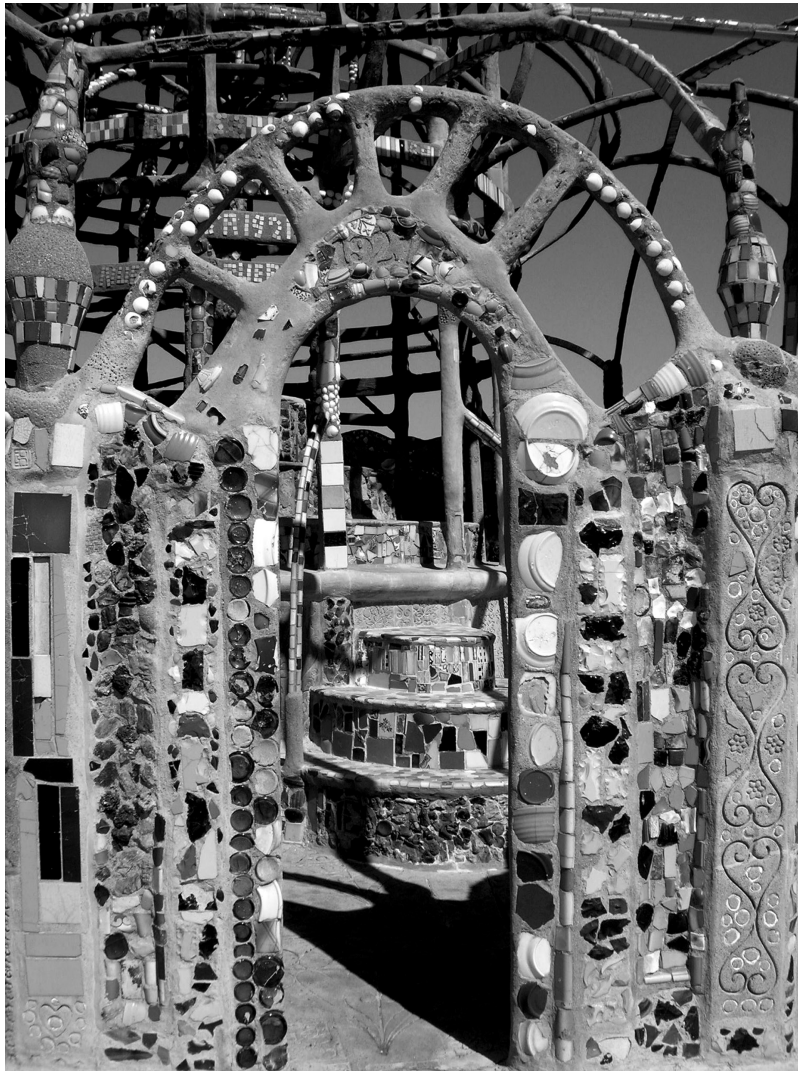
Material overabundance has also produced a backlash. Communities and individuals have responded to the excess of things in often contradictory ways. Thus, the Soviet Union embraced asceticism against capitalist consumerism (Buchli 2007; 2015: 132–142); in the West, communities of resistance, such as hippies and the Amish, followed a similar path of rejecting mass-produced material culture or at least minimising its consumption (Fowles and Heupel 2013). Islamic fundamentalism can be seen as yet another reaction towards the excess of capitalist overproduction and its sensuous temptations: one of the houses of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan, which was documented by two artists (Langlands and Bell 2004), revealed a bare environment that contrasts with the material proliferation of most Western homes. Another form of reaction is a troubled embracing of supermodern materialities. Folk art environments represent this alternative option. These are spaces mixing building, landscaping, painting and sculpture created by non-professional artists or architects, usually peculiar characters living in the margins of society (Ramírez 2004; Umberger 2007). Folk art environments emerge at the beginning of supermodernity, during the late nineteenth century and they cannot be understood without the Second Industrial Revolution, serial production, mass consumerism, and the popularisation of both modern materials (such as industrial glass and concrete) and techniques (montage and *pique-assiette*). Yet the principles that guide these architectures have more in common with purely non-modern principles, like organicism and accretion, than with modernity. They seem individual attempts at coming to terms with a world of material proliferation as never seen before: this is why many of these works incorporate hundreds or thousands of objects that are embedded in concrete or simply displayed (Figure 8.2). In a sense, they can be considered wild dreams of a deranged modern reason.

## ■ Monsters

It has been recently emphasised from neomaterialist and post-anthropocentric perspectives that we have to allow ourselves to be unsettled by things, by their radical alterity, and accept the impossibility of grasping their dark core. Things are unruly Others that are independent of human comprehension or control (Olsen 2010; Bogost 2012; Morton 2013; Pétursdóttir 2016, 2018). I am interested here in the notion of the thing as Other, but not in the sense of a subaltern, as it is sometimes depicted (Pétursdóttir 2012, 2013; Introna 2009, 2014; see Fowles 2016 for a critique). I think that the notion of material otherness needs to be expanded to fully accommodate its negativity, at least if we want to understand the contemporary era and humans' role in shaping it. With Christopher Witmore (forthcoming a), I find the concept of monstrosity useful. In fact, for Witmore, the present situation should be more accurately characterised by hypermonstrosity, because the sense of the monstrous is ancient, whereas what we confront now is beyond anything ever witnessed by those who formerly knew the monstrous. *Monstrum* in Latin originally meant “marvel” (like the Greek *terá*). Not any marvel, actually, but one that admonished of something. It is thus related to *monere*, “to warn”, and *monstrare*, “to show” (Lowe 2015: 8). *Monere* in turn is related to the root \**men*, which means “to think”. Thus, originally things or phenomena were monstrous in



**FIGURE 8.2** Embracing proliferation: the Watts Towers in Los Angeles were made by Italian immigrant Sabato Rodia with a variety of discarded artefacts and materials between 1921 and 1954. Author's photograph.



post-anthropocentric terms, that is, they objected to human notions of normality, challenged their control over reality and posed intellectual problems. *Monstrua* were ontologically and physically deviant—usually abnormal creatures (such as a calf with two heads or duplicated organs, a deformed child, an oversized being)—or half-animal, half-human hybrids, like tritons and centaurs (Lowe 2015: 22), a meaning also shared by the Greek term *tera* and that persists today in teratology, the study of abnormalities of physiological development. The negative character of the monster has also a moral dimension, as it refers to something outrageously evil. This meaning became common from the sixteenth century onwards in English, but it is attested in Latin as early as the first century BC (Lowe 2015: 13). Today, monstrosity



is regularly associated with inhumanity, daunting size, mutant nature and iniquity. It has, therefore, ontological, physical and moral properties. My point is that monstrous objects that are defined by all or some of these properties have proliferated in the contemporary era. Ontological properties refer to the temporality of artefacts, which exceeds that of previous human-made objects—not so much in their durability but in the effects of such durability (nuclear waste is the typical example); ontology also refers to hybrids, which often shock or threaten modern rationality. Physical properties comprise such characteristics as size and material composition. Moral properties refer to the uses to which monstrous objects are put and the lethal agency inherent to them.

The supermonstrous objects to which I will refer here share similarities with “world-objects” as defined by Michel Serres’s (1995 [1990]: 15): “artifacts that have at least one global-scale dimension (such as time, space, speed or energy)”. Satellites, nuclear waste, the Internet, or a nuclear bomb are all world-objects for Serres. The idea of the monstrous also overlaps with Timothy Morton’s hyperobjects (Morton 2013; also Hudson 2014), which are beings that vastly outscale humans in spatial and temporal terms. However, he includes here things that are not artefacts, such as quanta, water, or planets, and are in consequence devoid of moral qualities, which are essential to my definition of the monstrous. There is something else that I find crucial in supermonstrous objects, which is rarely considered: gender. Morton (2013: 34) writes that Oppenheimer’s famous words (“I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds”) indicate his inability to understand how little agency he actually had: “he had not become death. That role goes fair and square to the hyperobject.” I side with Oppenheimer in this. He *did* become death and Morton’s perspective gets dangerously close to exonerating humans (and more specifically men) from their actions: the concept of hyperanthropic objects, as proposed by Witmore (forthcoming a), can be used as a counterbalance that reinstates the responsibility of humans. In fact, it was fundamentally white, Western men that designed the atomic bomb. It was a white man that ordered the bomb to be dropped and a fully white, male crew that manned the *Enola Gay*—another hyperobject designed by male engineers—and dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. It is systematically men that are behind the monstrous things of the supermodern era (their design, their operation, the decisions that lead to them or their use) and the male character of supermodern technologies cannot be dissociated from their effects. Taking gender out of the question leaves a blind spot in our understanding of supermodern hyperobjects. The problem is that post-anthropocentrism runs the risk of doing without gender, which can be perceived as yet another anthropocentric trifle (but see Braidotti 2013 or Haraway 1991). In what follows, I will briefly illustrate the physical, ontological and moral dimension of supermodern monsters.

### *Physicality*

The physical excess of supermonstrous objects is perhaps the dimension of their monstrosity that is more readily available to archaeological scrutiny. Things seem to have grown out of all proportion during the contemporary era (Edgeworth 2010, 2013; Witmore 2015, forthcoming a). If the *Titanic* (1912) had a gross register tonnage in excess of 46,000, the *Harmony of the Seas* (2016) has five times more. Megacities are monstrous machines with over 10 million residents. In 2017, there were 25 cities with 10 times the population of the whole of England in the eleventh century (which was around 1.5 million inhabitants). Examples of megathings abound and include both objects and infrastructures (tunnel-boring machines, particle colliders) and things that are at the same time objects and infrastructures, such as floating liquified gas platforms. Some of the structures that I mentioned in the previous chapters, such as the US-Mexico border wall or the berms of the

**FIGURE 8.3** Physical monstrosity: the ruins of Prora, a Nazi resort on the Baltic Sea. Author's photograph.



Western Sahara, are also excellent examples of supermonstrous artefacts. The excessive materiality of many military structures means that they cannot be easily dismantled and many continue determining the life of people, animals and plants all over the world: the anti-tank wall of Longis Bay, Alderney, still stretches 600 metres along the beach and has forever changed the topography and ecosystem of the island (Meredith 2016: 2–3). Yet civilian structures can be equally massive. Matt Edgeworth (2010: 142) mentions salt caverns, which are created to store natural gas. Their dimensions defy human proportions, as they can be hundreds of metres wide and up to 800 metres high. Witmore (forthcoming a), in turn, refers to China's Three Gorges Dam, which is 2,335 metres long and has a catchment area of 1 million square kilometres. But less dramatic structures are no less unique in their size: Witmore (2015) also explores the consequences of what he calls an example of "bovine urbanism", a Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation in Texas that confines 58,000 cows in one square mile. We can compare this to the few square metres and a dozen cows of many traditional agropastoralist societies. It is not just that things are bigger. It is that they have global consequences. The Three Gorges Dam has changed the environment and the rotation of the earth—the first artefact to transform the planet at a cosmic level (Witmore forthcoming a), whereas cattle cities are related to global problems such as antibiotic-resistant bacteria, biodiversity loss, genetic manipulation and atmospheric pollution (Witmore 2015). It can be argued that mega-artefacts have existed for a very long time (the Great Wall of China or the Egyptian pyramids come to mind). But these are exceptional (thence that they are often called "marvels"); few, if any, could be considered truly nonlocal (Morton 2013) and their often protracted construction markedly differed from the temporality of contemporary mega-artefacts.

Archaeology may not be needed to give testimony of the physical excess of contemporary monsters, but it can provide long-term background for comparison. The largest

structures of antiquity pale in comparison with contemporary mega-artefacts: Greater Los Angeles covers 87,490 square kilometres. It is almost one thousand times bigger than one of the largest ancient cities, Babylon (9 square kilometres) and almost ten million times bigger than the average Iron Age hillfort in Atlantic Europe. Archaeology can also provide a deeper insight into material monstrosity. Consider the case of Prora, a colossal resort developed by the Nazis on the Baltic Sea (Wernicke and Schwartz 2003). It was to be a model vacation home for German workers, but the beginning of the Second World War ground the project to a halt. The buildings were partially reused as a refugee centre during the last years of the conflict and as a military field during the communist period. Today, it is a monstrous ruin emerging amidst a pine forest in front of the sea (Figure 8.3). Its true nature is revealed because it is abandoned: the grey and empty concrete mass extending for several kilometres along the beach is an eerie sight that exposes the brutality of the enterprise. Reduced to their bare materiality, we can also notice better the relations between different totalitarian mega-artefacts: the ruins of Prora look uncannily similar to those of Soviet developments equally ruined, such as the abandoned towns of Borne Sulinowo and Kłomino in Poland (see Figure 6.8), built by the USSR for soldiers and their families (Kobiałka et al. 2015): the same huge concrete boxes with rows of symmetrical windows to accommodate scores of proletarians.

Yet the naked concrete surfaces of totalitarian follies reveal something else. Paul Virilio's epiphany facing the ruins of the Atlantic Wall, the vast defence system deployed by the Nazis during the Second World War, was less related to the true nature of the Nazi regime as with wider phenomena characteristic of our era: the relationship between total war, speed, architecture, urbanism and the city (Virilio 1994). In a similar way, the ruins of the monstrous Ryugyong Hotel are revealing not as much of the totalitarian North Korean regime, as usually posited, but of the "silent omniscient ideologies" that pervade the capitalist world (D. Anderson 2015: 146). With "a lick of paint and a glass refit", writes Darran Anderson, Ryugyong "would be fit for critical celebration on the former docklands and sea-fronts of any sparkling metropolis". The same can be said of Prora. Monstrosity is not an aberration of totalitarianism, it is just another of the excesses of supermodernity. An archaeological exploration of ruined mega-artefacts should also examine the contradictions that led to their demise and that might be particularly obvious in ruins. Levi Bryant has argued that large-scale objects are more prone to incorporate bits of "entropy or chaos that the object cannot master in striving to metabolize its parts. In this way, I believe I get the beginnings of an account of how something like resistance is possible in social systems."<sup>1</sup>

Physical monstrosity should not be limited to enormous size, nor even to materials (that will be discussed later). Monstrosity can adopt the opposite shape: the reduction of matter (Edgeworth 2010, 2013). There is a kind of (moral) monstrosity in a microchip implant that enables the control of a human being or an animal. But we do not have to focus on the nano to perceive the problems of the small. A focus on gigantic constructions and artefacts may lead us to forget that space has been consistently reduced throughout the last hundred years for many. In Moscow, during the 1930s, living space per person fell by half: 4.2 square metres (Schlögel 2014: 89). In Hong Kong, demographic pressure and economic inequalities are behind the emergence of "coffin homes" or "cage homes", subdivided apartments where living space is reduced to 1.5 square metres (Dwan et al. 2013: 11)—thus making Stalinist Moscow a real-estate paradise. Like proliferation and deprivation, the colossal and the minimal coexist in our world and their distribution is not haphazard: it cannot be dissociated from class, race, or ethnicity.

## *Ontology*

I would like to briefly focus here on two aspects that define the ontology of the monstrous things of supermodernity: temporality and hybridity. Morton (2013) considers characteristic of hyperobjects a temporality that vastly transcends that of human beings. It can be argued that pre-industrial technologies produced things that are virtually eternal: pottery and even more so lithics are to all effects indestructible. The new materials of supermodernity that have become popular (plastic, aluminium, or steel) do not necessarily have the durability of chert. It is not so much the persistence of supermodern things, but the persistence of their effects that set them apart from artefacts of other eras. This is particularly clear in the case of two monstrous things of our age: high explosives and nuclear waste. They are not necessarily more lasting than premodern technologies like pottery, but unlike pottery, they remain active way beyond the duration of a human life. Thus, the wastelands that are modern battlefields are essentially different to similar sites in the past. As Saunders (2002: 37) has written “Great War shells possess a seemingly limitless capacity to embody the war that gave them birth.” Four hundred million active shells are believed to exist in the Western Front. In Verdun alone, one million shells were fired in a single day and it is believed that one in four never exploded (Jacquemot and Legendre 2011: 20). The Second World War increased this dangerous heritage. In Italy, up to a hundred thousand unexploded aerial bombs dropped by the USAAF can still be lurking underground (Shepherd 2016: 207). However, it is perhaps in the Pacific where the extent of the problem can be better grasped. Most islands and atolls were not subjected to the same large-scale post-war clean-up operations that were carried out in Europe and they are still littered with enormous amounts of explosive artefacts. These make up dangerous archaeological landscapes that will compromise the future of the islands for decades or even centuries to come (Spennemann 2006). In different parts of the world, local communities have learned to adapt to—and even benefit from—this peculiar form of waste and in some cases they have ended up developing affective links with it (Breithoff 2012; Ceasar 2016). Regarding nuclear debris, radioactive contaminants remain active for thousands of years after isotopic life ends (in the case of plutonium-239, its half-life is 24,100 years). Perhaps not surprisingly, archaeologists have been called to provide advice on how to signpost nuclear dumps (Kaplan and Adams 1986; Holtorf and Högberg 2015: 515). Radioactive garbage, worrying as it is, is not the only substance capable of long-term pollution. In the South China Sea, an area renowned for its rich marine biodiversity, there are over a hundred tankers sunk during the Second World War, totalling two million tons, which are a potential threat to wildlife (Monfils et al. 2006: 786). For the first time in history, monstrous things project our era forward into an uncertain future and cast doubts as to the possibility of dividing history into clear-cut historical phases.

Hybridity is another element that defines contemporary monsters at an ontological level. Hybrids are often celebrated, as breaking with those modernist dualisms that have had such a negative impact upon the lives of so many people, animals and plants (Haraway 1991; Hardt and Negri 2000: 367). Cyborgs have been seen as the epitome of the supermodern. Not that they are a recent invention (Pearson and Shanks 2001: 70–71), but highly technified hybrids are typical of our age. They thoroughly blur the boundaries between the human, the non-human and the inhuman and are ambiguous from an ethical and ontological point of view. I am particularly interested in historicising supermodern hybrids and exploring their dark side. My argument is that technical developments from the late nineteenth century enabled the appearance of problematic mixtures at the dawn of supermodernity. Consider the case of trinitite, the new mineral that emerged after the Trinity nuclear bomb test on 16 July 1945, and that is made

**FIGURE 8.4** Ontological monstrosity: plastiglomerate from the beach of Eidsbukta, Norway. Photograph by Þóra Pétursdóttir.



of arkosic sand melted by the atomic blast (Morton 2013: 44–45). Or the sand of Omaha Beach, which examined under the microscope reveals a mixture of vitrified silica, metallic remains and microfragments of exploded artillery shells (Carpentier and Marcigny 2014: 68). Or the blend of human and non-human matter propitiated by the firestorms unleashed by Allied bombers on Germany: bodies and personal belongings melted with asphalt (Friedrich 2008: 6). Or the monstrous combination of human and inorganic matter compressed in the debris of the World Trade Center after the 9/11 attacks (Jouannais 2012: 145–146). Or the more banal plastiglomerate, the new rock of the Anthropocene (Corcoran et al. 2014) (Figure 8.4). Ironically, several centuries of modernity striving to divide the human and the non-human, nature and culture, persons and things, have been thwarted by the technologies and ideologies produced by that same modernity, which have not stopped creating monsters. First World War trenches provided the first scenario for their proliferation.

Trenches are paradigmatic of contemporary materiality for several reasons. The first is directly related to the notion of the cyborg. Trench warfare required a new kind of warrior, very different to the modern soldier that had emerged during the late seventeenth century. The period after the Thirty Years War (1618–1648) had seen the appearance of colourful military uniforms, disciplined soldiers (with disciplined bodies and disciplined as a collective body) and clear geometric arrangements in the battlefield. Elements that had survived from the Middle Ages (such as personal armour) gradually disappeared or were replaced by firearms (as happened with pikes, spears and crossbows). As the Great War advanced, many of these obsolete objects reappeared in trench warfare: sledgehammers, clubs, lances, helmets and cuirasses. That a war that became a turning point in military technology was also fought



with medieval weapons was, in a sense, an admonition of the paradoxical temporal and ontological mixtures that supermodernity was about to provide (Virilio 1994: 27–28). The First World War soldier, protected with a gas mask and a helmet and armed with sledgehammer and hand grenades, is a horrifying steampunk icon that challenges ideas of progress (Dawdy 2010). This soldier-cyborg was a warning: the world to come was going to be heterogeneous and contradictory, brutally archaic and hypermodern.

If the soldier was a dark hybrid, so was the trench where he was fighting. It was a thorough reversal of the bourgeois world of the nineteenth century, something that blurred all accepted boundaries. The trench was both house and grave, an extremely primitive structure—redolent of prehistoric earthworks—and the only means for achieving effective defence against supermodern mass destruction; a public space and one where the most intimate acts (including defecation and death) happened in plain sight; a place where humans became rats and rats cohabited with humans; where waste and things (the systemic and the archaeological) became barely distinguishable. In the trench, the limits of the body were trespassed: when mud entered its orifices, bullets perforated it, parasites ate through it, shrapnel was embedded in its flesh and bones—and also fragments of bones and teeth of other soldiers, and feet rotted in the mud. This image of the human hybrid, melted with the trench, was perfectly captured by the Expressionist painter Otto Dix, a veteran from the Great War. But it is perhaps more poignant in the cyborg that were the *gueules cassés*, the men that had been completely disfigured by artillery fire and had their faces reconstructed surgically, often with added prostheses and in some cases full masks (Gehrhart 2013). Enamelled phosphor-bronze and tin replaced flesh and cartilage. As the cyborgs of science fiction, the artificial additions prevented the wounded to convey emotions. Masks, more than mutilations, deprived men of their humanity. Technological advances have enabled the proliferation of cyborgs in recent decades: on the one hand, mutilations have grown, among soldiers and civilians alike, due to the widespread use of land mines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs); on the other hand, there are new artificial ways of restoring limbs and keeping people alive—sometimes tied to a machine for life. These unglamorous cyborgs have been captured by documentary photographer Nina Berman (2004). Her images present people where the organic and the inorganic can no longer be separated. This is the dark side of symmetry. Of this archaeology can give testimony as well. The exhumations of people killed by artillery fire recover a mishmash of broken bones, cartridges, personal belongings and cloth—a rearrangement of things and people that proves in the most sinister way, that things are, indeed, us (Webmoor and Witmore 2008).

### *Morality*

Paradoxically, at the same time that evil things proliferate more than ever, scholars seem to have adopted an agnostic stance towards things—since they are beyond humanity, they cannot be judged using human ethical judgement: they are basically indifferent (Morton 2013). In some cases, it is ethical advocacy toward things, rather than indifference that is espoused (Olsen 2012; Pétursdóttir 2012, 2013, 2016; Introna 2009, 2014). I fully agree with Bjørnar Olsen (2012: 23) that engagements of people “with things, animals, and other natures are far from trivial, in the derogatory sense of the word, but imply knowledge, care, and attachment, and a respect for what things are in their own being”. I relate to this perspective through my own experiences with nonmodern societies, from the Amazon to my homeland Galicia. And it of course reflects well Olsen’s own relations with fishermen and reindeer, water and rocks in the far North. The problem is that supermonstrous objects play in another league. Their

physical, ontological and moral monstrosity prevents them from being appraised within the same framework as most nonmodern things—the reindeer, axes, or boats that are frequently used as examples by Bjørnar Olsen (2010). Thus, few or any of the objects mentioned in some of the main texts of symmetrical or neomaterialist archaeology (e.g. Olsen 2010; Witmore 2007, 2014; Pétursdóttir 2012, 2013) can be labelled monsters. They can be more or less difficult to handle for humans, but they are scarcely monstrous from a physical, ontological, or moral point of view. We do not see cluster bombs, methamphetamine, or asbestos mentioned, although more recently Christopher Witmore (2015, forthcoming a) has turned his attention to ultramonstrosity and excess, thus correcting the previous privileging of positive things (also Olsen and Witmore 2014).

Irrespective of whether or not we should extend ethics to non-sentient beings (Pétursdóttir 2013: 43–44), I find it urgent to distinguish between categories of things on moral grounds. Not all modern things are, of course, monstrous—far from it. There is a plethora of virtuous things, such as antibiotics or geothermal power plants. I do not want to appear as a conservative neoprimitivist. But not all things are innocent (Hodder 2014). All things equally exist but they do not exist equally, as famously asserted by Ian Bogost (2012: 11). This is very true, but the assertion should have more than ontological implications. *Plasmodium falciparum* and a Maxim machine gun are similar on ontological grounds: both are non-human beings that hold an impregnable reserve in Heideggerian terms. Yet they do not exist equally in moral terms. The otherness of the Maxim has a monstrous moral dimension that is lacking in *Plasmodium falciparum*, a parasitic organism causing malaria, even if they are both equally lethal and even if they both have effects that cannot be fully controlled by humans (be they the spread of disease or the proliferation of guns which end up in the hands of unexpected users). The machine gun can be subjected to moral judgement because it has been designed by human beings and is produced and used by them. Much of the post-anthropocentric discussion on things conflates beings whose existence depends on humans (a knife) and others which are independent from them (water) and this I find morally dangerous. The monsters to which I refer are always the result of human intervention and therefore are always liable of moral judgement—unlike Morton’s hyperobjects. However, it is important to bear in mind that material qualities play a prominent role here. Certain forms of damage can only be inflicted by specific forms of materiality, be they the chemical properties of white phosphorous or the combination of trinitrotoluene and steel that produces shell fragments.

Indeed, important ethical-material discussions have surrounded the emergence of some of the most prominent monsters of our era, be they bullets, carbon dioxide, or nuclear materials, and these discussions have been materially grounded. Paul Cornish (2013) has explored the debates regarding the ethics of modern small arms ammunition. This appeared, like many other elements that characterise the contemporary age, at the threshold of supermodernity, in the 1880s. New bullets were of lower calibre than previous ones and inflicted new kinds of wounds: they had the tendency to fragment and tumble and therefore to produce large wounds that were similar to those of explosive bullets (Figure 8.5). Attempts at banning the most “inhumane” types or limiting their effects have been futile. This has been for a variety of reasons, including a lack of understanding of terminal ballistics, the impossibility of limiting the power of projectiles or stabilising their trajectories, and the fact that there are other weapons causing far more horrifying wounds than small arms ammunition—artillery shells, for instance. This evinces, on the one hand, the complex ethical and political implications of material monsters; on the other, their autonomy: once invented, like Frankenstein’s creation, they lead their own lives and are difficult to control.

**FIGURE 8.5** Moral monstrosity: 7 mm bullets deformed after impact, from a Spanish Civil War battlefield. Author's photograph.



Some of the adjectives that are used to describe the agency, autonomy and effects of things from an ontological perspective can be used to describe a moral dimension. Thus, it has often been argued that things are ontologically sticky or viscous (Olsen 2010: 162; Morton 2013: 30; Byrne 2013: 599, 604). We cannot get rid of them easily, they envelope us, enter our bodies and sediment as material memories that cannot be shaken. All this is true. But it is possible to bring up other forms of stickiness that are associated to moral monstrosity. Think of napalm, white phosphorus, or mustard gas. They are definitely stickier than water, ruins, or photographs. These are not spontaneous monsters detached from the fate of humans. These are engineered monsters, devised to penetrate the skin and burn the insides of fellow humans. They leave durable scars that not only damage the body, but also the self. They produce material memories of the worst kind. Even less contentious weapons like conventional artillery shells produce hundreds of fragments or dispense shrapnel that tears apart noses, eyes, flesh and bones. They made the *gueule cassées*, monsters created by a monstrous thing. Even in scientific texts of the post-war period, the word “monster” and “inhuman” were common and the maimed were compared to gargoyles (Gehrhardt 2013: 269). The *gueule cassées* were a sticky material memory, too, one that refused to vanish after

1918 and that made the war ever present (Gehrhardt 2013). Every time I recover a shell fragment in my fieldwork and feel its many twisted angles, sharp like razors, I cannot avoid thinking how monstrous this artefact is, how much sadism is materialised in it. We should not overlook the fact that modern hyperobjects are able to inflict novel forms of damage, which are related to their physicality and ontology. Advances in engineering, physics and chemistry throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced new technologies that have changed the experience of pain and its temporal dimensions: nuclear radiation or asbestos, for instance, can kill slowly of cancer, thus expanding the temporality of suffering; the way in which white phosphorus or a chlorine cloud damage human bodies was simply unthinkable a millennium ago, and the lasting destruction of the landscape during the First World War, which took place on a geological scale, could only be achieved through high explosive.

## ■ Waste

“Landfill sites are modernity’s ruins” (Shanks et al. 2004: 67). They are, at least, its most eloquent vestiges, where the material excess of supermodernity can be better grasped. Not only in landfills, but also in garbage dumps, junkyards, scrapyards, boneyards, ghostships and other abandoned vehicles and machinery (Rathje 2001; Burström 2009b; Herva 2014; Kobińska 2015; Seitsonen et al. 2016). They are spaces of oblivion that put the consequences of overproduction and overconsumption out of sight. But rubbish is everywhere: Geyer et al. (2017) have calculated that 8,300 million metric tons of virgin plastic have been produced to date, which have generated 6,300 million tons of plastic waste, only a fraction of which has been recycled or incinerated (21 per cent). Broken into microscopic fragments, they litter the entire world and enter living organisms (Derraik 2002; Thompson et al. 2004, 2009; Lusher 2015). We ourselves have become rubbish, made of microdebris that poisons us without us noticing it. Ours is “a civilization of excess, redundancy, waste and waste disposal” (Bauman 2004: 97). It is a civilisation of waste more than any other, not just because more things are produced and therefore discarded, but because things in general are more ephemeral and in many ways categorised as prospective rubbish—Styrofoam and glass containers, plastic wrapping, cardboard boxes. The category of the disposable has expanded immensely to incorporate all kinds of artefacts (Figure 8.6). Consider the case of motor vehicles: they have a relatively short lifespan in most developed countries, compared to the high ecological cost of its production. In the United States, for instance, the average life of a car is 11.6 years.<sup>2</sup> Instead, oxcarts in many cultures are not seen as disposable. In Galicia, Spain, they were an essential artefact in every homestead, whose life was extended as much as possible. Even when they were no longer usable, they were rarely discarded: the platform of the cart was hung from the wall of the courtyard, where it degraded slowly. According to one ethnographer, oxcarts were the object of a “veritable funerary cult” (Lorenzo 2003: 31). They never became waste—until modernity broke in.

I have mentioned above how the trenches were the first place where mass consumerism reached its apogee. It is also there where the wastefulness of the contemporary era can be better grasped. Armies had units devoted to the recovery and recycling of waste, but this did not prevent millions of glass bottles, for instance, from ending up being discarded everywhere (Laparra 2013). The impression that the supply of industrial goods was unlimited triggered a happy-go-lucky attitude among soldiers. Thus, the same bottles and glass

**FIGURE 8.6** An abandoned T-55 tank in Ethiopia. Author's photograph.



containers that were being carelessly thrown around in the trenches, were still avidly stored and reused in many peasant communities in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century (González-Ruibal 2003: 182–184) and even today glass jars are systematically recycled at home in countries like Bulgaria (Resnick 2018).

Rubbish has material effects beyond the autonomous object that is discarded. Redundant things are waste and produce waste: degraded places and landscapes. This was not so much the case in traditional societies (and even in many modern cities until the mid-nineteenth century), where there was a higher rate of recycling—artefacts were reused; pigs and dogs ate rubbish; organic materials decomposed (Hayden and Cannon 1983)—and dumps and dirt were often part and parcel of the urban fabric (Béguin 2013). Today, the place for waste



is carefully planned and separated from residential areas (in the so-called developed world) and it pollutes, physically and symbolically, whatever it touches. Wasted places—ecologically and socially degraded environments—are often very far from the place where the artefacts were originally used, which is particularly the case with toxic and electronic waste (White, R. 2008; Graves-Brown 2014; Taffel 2015). Their final location responds to the geopolitics of poverty and race, which they help to reinforce. Thus, ship-breaking in Bangladesh and India transforms ocean-going vessels into usable scrap metal, but in the process it ruins land, water and life. Because ships are broken directly in the intertidal zone, oil spills impregnate the mud and toxic chemicals are absorbed by fish and other marine animals, while coastal forests are cleared to make room for the industry (Abdullah et al. 2013). Wastelands—fresh environmental ruins—are difficult to commoditise into heritage, unlike other forms of industrial remains (but see Schlanger et al. 2016). The notion of wasteland, however, is insufficient to refer to the landscapes of refuse of our era, because they are no longer confined to land: the deep sea is also now a dump (Arnshav 2014) and even the exosphere, where thousands of discarded artefacts orbit the earth (Gorman 2005, 2015). The “orbital midden” (Capelotti 2015: 54), an archaeological site of sorts, comprises high-tech elements, but also urine bags and other forms of organic waste (Shanks et al. 2004: 66). In total, over half a million items in the exosphere have to be carefully tracked to avoid collisions with satellites, spacecraft, or the International Space Station.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the limits of tracking, there might be up to 100 million fragments (Gorman 2015: 31). For the first time in history, humans have not only modified the landscape with debris, but also the sky.

Human beings can also become waste as part of the process of reification of human life typical of the modern world. Two different kinds (or stages) of human waste can be distinguished: people ruined in life—what Bauman (2004) calls “wasted lives”—and people ruined in death: transformed into corpses that are abandoned, fragmented, dispersed, or buried in unmarked graves (De León 2015). Bodies in mass burials, in fact, are often equated to garbage thrown into a dump (Halilovich 2013: 36) and the mass grave itself can be seen as a rubbish bin, which acts as a deconstituting device—in Lucas’s words, a mechanism that “articulates the recognition that we no longer need/desire/want this object” (Lucas 2002: 19). In the case of the mass grave, what is unconstituted is the humanity of the corpse. Sometimes the equation of bodies with rubbish is quite obvious: the military used a garbage dump to dispose burned human remains in La Hoyada, Peru, in the 1980s (Rojas-Pérez 2017) and in the Nazi camp of Mauthausen, ashes and cremated remains were discarded in a place that was also used as a rubbish dump (Theune 2017: 114). This strategy makes forensic investigation extremely difficult (Connor 2007: 173–178). During the Spanish Civil War, corpses of people killed by right-wing militia were thrown in mine pits (Etxeberria et al. 2014), which were often used later for discarded garbage, animal carcasses and construction debris. Yet it is not necessary to go to contexts of mass violence to find mixtures of human remains and rubbish: the same combination of human and non-human matter appears along the US-Mexico borderland (De León 2015). The association of certain corpses with waste can be seen as part of the wider work of coloniality and its racially based class categories. There are bodies that have to be protected in life and honoured in death and there are bodies that can be wasted in life and discarded as rubbish in death. We have grown accustomed to see them in the news: human fragments or disfigured bodies mixed with rubble and debris after an attack with drones in Yemen (Forensic Architecture/SITU Research 2014), the bloated bodies and miserable belongings of sub-Saharan migrants floating on the Mediterranean, as yet another polluting agent of the sea. Anthropologists have studied how emigrants are transformed into

**FIGURE 8.7** The prison of Carabanchel in Madrid, one of the largest in Europe, was abandoned in 1998. All of a sudden, everything that was inside the building became rubbish. The image shows one of the galleries with furniture and garbage thrown from the aisles into the safety mesh. Author's photograph.



commodities during their journeys toward promised lands (Vogt 2013); archaeologists have studied their becoming waste (De León 2015).

More specifically, unmarked graves and mass graves can be seen as containers of the refuse produced by the political operations of supermodernity. Indeed, the metaphors of

industrial debris were widely used by the Stalinist regime to refer to what was seen as an unavoidable loss of life in the creation of a new society. Discarded people are not too different from hazardous waste, in that they are abject, dangerous matter that has to be eliminated far from the public gaze. The equation of bodies and garbage is particularly obvious when corpses have been moved around, transferred from one mass grave to another, burned, or disarticulated to prevent identification by families, enemy forces, or investigators (Skinner et al. 2002; López-Mazz 2015a). Wasted lives are materially degraded and ruined in life as well, as Bauman (2004) poignantly reminds us. Discarded people are quarantined in specific places (ghettos, shantytowns, slums), subjected to material processes of decay (Vergara 1995, 1999), not dissimilar to those occurring at landfills; their bodies suffer from higher rates of morbidity and mortality than the rest of the population (e.g. Haan et al. 1987), and the material culture that they use is often the discarded excess of consumer society.

Waste is inherently linked to excess: too much is produced, too much is consumed and too much is thrown away (Figure 8.7). Some authors have argued that the idea of a throwaway society is exaggerated and empirically wrong, since “issues of care, concern, guilt, and anxiety are rarely absent from the process of discarding” (Gregson et al. 2007: 698). While this is true, it is also the case that ours is, in quantifiable material terms, the Age of Waste and the archaeological record attests to it: the ever-growing size of landfills (Rathje and Murphy 1992: 4–5) and polluted landscapes covered in rubbish cannot be compensated by recycling, collecting and curating practices—or guilt. Excess and waste were at the heart of the work and obsessions of George Bataille. For Bataille (2014), excess was essential not only to the human condition, but to life on Earth. Although he considers excess inherent to nature and provides a historical picture of its development, it is obvious that it was his own experience of advanced modernity (at a personal and social level), the two world wars and particularly that peculiar form of excess that was the Marshall Plan (Bataille 2014: 142–161), that explains his philosophy. In any case, he argues that there is an unavoidable overabundance in the world, a surplus of energy, which in the very last instance is due to the fact that the sun gives without ever receiving, and it gives more energy than is necessary to sustain life. Rather than growth, what prevails is luxury (*luxe*), which comprises everything that is excessive, even superfluous, particularly eating, sex and death. This surplus of energy can only be wasted, lost without profit, either gloriously, luxuriously, or catastrophically. Waste is not a tangential problem, a by-product of civilisation that can be managed with adequate technical procedures: it is at the heart of life and human existence. In traditional societies, feasts and monuments were forms of burning away this excess of wealth; in modern societies, industrialised war and welfare (Bataille 2014: 41–42): the “greatest orgies of wealth” that were the two world wars coincided with a general elevation of the standard of living and growing consumption rates. Destructive forms of neutralising excess have increased in the contemporary era and nothing indicates that they will drastically diminish in the near future. For Bataille, the ultimate solution to avoid sacrifices or disasters that are consequence of the accumulation of excessive energy is to give—freely.

## ■ Atmospheres

I would like to end this chapter with a reminder of the extant material diversity that still characterises our world and that is sometimes forgotten. This diversity can be approached through the concept of atmosphere. The notion is useful to describe such a diversity, which should not be reduced to the typological or stylistic. Mikkel Bille and Tim Flohr Sørensen (2016) have

eloquently argued that architecture cannot be simply equated with its physical elements—walls, windows, sills, foundations, posts and so on—which are often the main focus of archaeologists. Architecture is actually best understood as an assemblage of “people, places, things, anticipations, time, sensation, seasons, weather, memory and meaning” (Bille and Sørensen 2016: 3). As such, it is composed of both tangible and intangible elements, which are continuously evolving and shaping the experience of the building. They resort to the concept of atmosphere to make sense of all this that “cannot be excavated”, but is essential in determining what the “building *should* feel like” (Bille and Sørensen 2016: 12; original emphasis). From this perspective, architecture is mainly an intangible phenomenon in people’s lives, a sense of attunement to a place. It is atmosphere, “the ontologically vague experience of being situated” (Bille and Sørensen 2016: 14) that defines the spirit of the place, its *genius loci*. I am in partial agreement with this perspective. I find the concept of atmosphere essential to understand the material environments of the contemporary world (or any world whatsoever), but I would not underestimate its material aspects. On the one hand, light, sound, or weather can be understood as material phenomena (in the way that ideas or values are not). On the other, although I do agree that architecture, or rather the built environment, cannot be reduced to walls and doors, I still believe that it is a densely material phenomenon, which includes things such as paint, ivy, patina, dirt, rust, garbage, humidity, saprolite and mice. I also believe that these material phenomena are crucial in defining particular atmospheres. It is what makes the difference between a modern house in London and one in Malta (Schofield 2013: 472–473)—not just sound or light (which are of course extremely important). Manifesting atmosphere requires a specific way of telling (Chapter 5) and another sensibility. It requires paying attention to sensorial experiences, to faint traces and to anything that is apparently irrelevant. Yet irrelevant details can make all the difference.

Paying attention to atmospheres is essential in contemporary archaeology if we want to do justice to the heterogeneous materiality of the contemporary world. There are, however, few works that seriously engage with atmospheres. Important exceptions come from the material explorations of Scandinavian archaeologists. An attunement to atmospheres, mediated through poetic writing and images, is particularly manifest in the work of Þóra Pétursdóttir (2012, 2013, 2016; Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014b). Thus, in her description of Eidsbukta, mentioned above, Pétursdóttir (2017, 2018) deals with drift, geology and weather to capture the feeling of the place. Another excellent example is the work of Esther Breithoff (2017) on the Chaco War (1932–1935). In her narrative, vegetation, weather, thirst and indigenous knowledge are as important as trenches and artillery shells. Unlike most military history, her archaeology of the conflict successfully conveys the specificity of the atmosphere in which the war was fought and that makes it so different to any other conflict of the period. Still another example is the work of Christopher Witmore’s chorography of the Peloponnese (Witmore forthcoming b), where Mycenaean walls, concrete farms, cicadas and orange trees are part of a thick description that manages to manifest the texture of a specific world.

Atmosphere refers also to the texture, weight and excess of the material world. And this is not the same in post-communist Russia, in post-nomadic Somalia, or in postmodern America. Material density has no meaning and is difficult to translate into a discourse, but it is essential to a definition of a place. The sense of being overwhelmed by an overabundant and messy material world is felt by many Western travellers in the former Soviet Union. Coming from well-ordered and even sanitised environments, their encounter with Russia or Ukraine often comes as a shock. A British visitor looking for modernist monuments in Kiev comments on a visit to a cemetery that tombs are



awash with mud and trash . . . There is rubbish of all sorts—the usual bottles, packets and plastic products, together with large quantities of toilet paper scattered around (perhaps as a means of clearing up the all-pervasive mess). The mud itself, congealing with the remains of thawing snow, is of fairly apocalyptic proportions . . .

(Hatherley 2014: 1098)

Although this material experience of waste and dereliction is essential to understand Kiev and many other post-communist cities, it is rarely tackled by those interested in Soviet architecture or post-Soviet landscapes (Hatherley 2014: 1093) (Figure 8.8). Bjørnar Olsen's reflections on materiality have much to do with his encounters with the brutal and chaotic materiality of the communist world, in the derelict towns of north-west Russia and in the mining colony of Pyramida, in Svalbard (Olsen 2003: 93; 2010: 34; Andreassen et al. 2010; Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014: 50). "How do we 'sublate' the sewer pipes or a rusty harbour terminal in a northern Russian port?" (Olsen 2003: 93). The peculiar material texture and excess of Soviet and post-Soviet environments is beautifully captured in the photographs of Pyramida (Andreassen et al. 2010) and in other photodocumentaries of post-communist countries. Ackermann and Gobert (2017) have been looking for statues of Lenin in Ukraine and Christopher Herwig (2015) searches for bus stops in a variety of former Soviet Republics. In both cases, the images do not just capture the statues or bus stops themselves but, perhaps more interestingly, the atmosphere that envelops them and that is so specifically post-communist: the waste, the scrap, the recycled stuff, the ubiquity of cheap materials, the ruination and the lack of maintenance.

**FIGURE 8.8** The atmosphere of post-communism: the outskirts of a town in northern Russia. Author's photograph.





**FIGURE 8.9** The atmosphere of a northern European city: Frogner neighbourhood, Oslo, Norway. Author's photograph.



It is in these materially rich environments where the excessive nature of our era is better captured. In large parts of the Western world, dense, unruly materiality is spatially confined to ghettos and landfills and for many people lie beyond daily experience—which is a way of concealing the consequences of leading excessive lives. Privatopias and high-class neighbourhoods, with their highly controlled atmospheres, can be spaces of sensuous impoverishment. During the writing of this book, I was fortunate enough to spend six weeks in the exclusive neighbourhood of Frogner in Oslo (Figure 8.9). Soon I felt the clean, noiseless and odourless atmosphere a bit oppressive and longed for the material excess and disorder of southern Europe (which is so enervating also, in a different way). This has little to do with architecture or urbanism, but with light, patina, texture, decay and the amount of people and things and their spatial arrangements.

There are other contemporary worlds that are materially saturated without being the effect of an excessive modernity: In South America or sub-Saharan Africa, there are rich atmospheres that have little in common with middle-class Western neighbourhoods (see Figure 8.10). Here, it is as if things have been set free. The organic and the inorganic, the artificial and the natural mix in what seems to be chaos, but is a world ordered under totally different principles to that of our regimented modernity. Unfortunately, ethnographic descriptions have tended to avoid for a long while serious engagement with non-Western material environments, except for a few touches of colour at the beginning. This is now changing (Taussig 2004; Gordillo 2014), but most ethnography still tends to forget anything that cannot be translated into social or symbolic terms. It has been ethnoarchaeologists who have been more adept at describing materially rich atmospheres with enormous detail, but this has passed unnoticed by both ethnographers and most archaeologists. Some classical ethnoarchaeological works, such as those of P.J. Watson (1979) or Kramer (1994), captured the texture of traditional villages in Iran which are absent from conventional ethnographies. By documenting material environments for their own sake, instead of for their analogical

**FIGURE 8.10** The atmosphere of an African country: Hargeisa, Somaliland. Author's photograph.



possibilities, we are doing an archaeology of the present and visibilising the multiple temporalities, spatialities and materialities of the contemporary world (González-Ruibal 2006a).

Atmospheres are shaped by material and immaterial elements, human and non-human, organic and inorganic. They are also crucially shaped by the past: this has been eloquently demonstrated by Shannon Lee Dawdy in her densely textured narrative of New Orleans (Dawdy 2016), where patina accounts for the atmospheric qualities of a past that is present in manifold ways. When trying to describe a particular atmosphere we should be asking: how much of the past is present here and in which way? Has it been sanitised or is it wild and crumbling? Is it overwhelming or shy? Is it heterogeneous or uniform? In Witmore's chorography, the past is always present, it is blended with the earth and the rocks and is manifold and complex (Witmore forthcoming b). The Bronze Age and the Hellenistic period, the Middle Ages and the Neolithic sprout at every step and are mixed in every corner. Yet this is not always the case. There are places where one material past prevails like an enormous burden—even without the intervention of heritage managers. There are also places where the past has been thoroughly annihilated or homogenised—malls, airports, suburban sprawls—where they no longer contribute to their atmosphere. Where ruins have no room. The material homogeneity of supermodernity also requires the end of all entropy.

## ■ Summary

Material excess is perhaps what better defines the contemporary era and it is one of the reasons why supermodernity has to be approached with an archaeological perspective. It often takes paradoxical forms: it appears both as a proliferation of things and as material deprivation. Things are more varied and abundant than ever, but for many people in the world, they can also be scarcer than they used to be and monotonous. Many societies have seen their living standards plummet due to economic crises or colonial depredation, and their ability

to access consumer goods has dwindled in accordance; meanwhile, traditional communities have lost their know-how and their material assemblages have been impoverished, as they are unable to purchase things and unable to produce them themselves.

The contemporary world is populated by what have been called “hyperobjects” or “world-objects”, which can be described as monstrous. In this chapter, I have argued that material monstrosity has a physical, ontological and moral dimension. Physical monstrosity is particularly obvious in hyperobjects’ excessive size: from megalopolis to megabombs, objects seem to have been blown out of all proportion. At the same time, things have never been smaller. And I am referring here not to the obvious— nanotechnology—but to less glimmering technologies of the micro: the ever-divided and diminished living space to which millions of people are subjected. The ontological dimension of monsters is nowhere better seen as in their deranged temporality: things that have lasting effects beyond the life cycle of any organism, as radionuclides. But most things are characterised by the opposite quality: ephemerality. Apart from temporality, hybridity is the other ontological characteristic of monstrous things. I have explored here the dark side of cyborgs and hybrids—from supermodern trench warriors to unnatural geochemical blends. Physical and ontological monstrosity is inextricably related to their moral nature. This is an aspect that has been largely neglected by post-anthropocentric and neomaterialist perspectives, since morality inevitably puts the human onto centre stage—things per se are inherently amoral. Forgetting ethics, however, is dangerous. We should not conflate things that cannot exist without human intervention and things that are independent from humans and whose effects cannot be judged on moral grounds.

The materiality of the contemporary era, as I have argued throughout this book, cannot be grasped by paying attention only to that which is in use. An emphasis on the production and consumption of things has been balanced in recent years with a greater emphasis on waste. This has been the case not so much in archaeology and anthropology, as in the natural sciences, because the Anthropocene can only be defined by (excessive) garbage—the by-product of increasing production and consumption. In this chapter, I have emphasised the relevance of supermodern debris and its perverse nature, as more and more humans are categorised as waste.

The chapter ends with a reflection on atmospheres. Supermodernity has strong homogenising tendencies, but there is still a variety of material environments in the world, which cannot be properly appraised taking into account only stylistic or technical aspects. There are sensorial qualities, that have to do with weather, dirt and cleanliness, texture, sound, the mixture of objects, its scarcity or abundance, its arrangement in the world and its temporality, that define what a place is. An archaeology that intends to define the contemporary era—as any other era—has to be able to apprehend and manifest these unique atmospheres.

## ■ Notes

- 1 <https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2011/09/10/wilderness-ontology-cuny-talk/> (accessed 19 September 2018).
- 2 [www.rita.dot.gov/bts/sites/rita.dot.gov.bts/files/publications/national\\_transportation\\_statistics/html/table\\_01\\_26.html\\_mfd](http://www.rita.dot.gov/bts/sites/rita.dot.gov.bts/files/publications/national_transportation_statistics/html/table_01_26.html_mfd) (accessed 1 October 2017).
- 3 [www.nasa.gov/mission\\_pages/station/news/orbital\\_debris.html](http://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/station/news/orbital_debris.html) (accessed 15 April 2017).

# 9

## Concluding remarks

### Beyond the Anthropocene

IN THIS BOOK, I have tried to define the Age of Supermodernity, a period that starts somewhere in the transition between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. I have examined our era from an archaeological point of view, that is, from the point of view of materiality, but more particularly from the perspective of the archaeological record: the things that have been abandoned, discarded, made redundant, ruined, annihilated. An emphasis on the archaeological record inevitably puts the accent on destruction and therefore offers a counterbalance to consumption studies (Miller 1987), whose emphasis on creativity have dramatically downplayed the consequences of consuming practices. This is, in any case, *an* archaeology of the contemporary era. There are others that explore daily life, music festivals, zoos, street art, or popular culture and that complement what has been described here. They are important to understand the complexities of the world in which we live (particularly the Western world), its variety and its richness. In comparison, my picture might look gloomy, but I believe that it is urgent to produce systematic, reasoned critiques of the dark side of modernity, which is different from writing apocalyptic pamphlets.

As I see it, an archaeological critique of the present can be better done by examining the archaeological record, which means placing the focus on phenomena that are not always conspicuous. Invisibility can take the form of concealment, but also the opposite—hypervisibility—because the best way to hide something is to put it in plain view (Kobiałka 2013). Thus, we fail to see what has been left outside consciousness, for being too trivial and repetitive. We fail to see, or prefer not to see, the material proofs of our irresponsible social behaviour. And there are things that even if we would like to see them we cannot: political or corporate crimes that are hidden, often literally buried. We do not see either, or prefer not to see, the remains of worlds that our own world destroys in its accelerated path towards nowhere. Archaeology visibilises all these phenomena.

I have argued that materiality, and material remains more specifically, are what better defines our era—at least the negative side of our era. This is perhaps one of the reasons why there is so much interest in materiality these days across the social sciences and the humanities. It also explains the growing interest in the Anthropocene, too. Discussions on the current geological age are all about things and substances produced by humans (plastics, concrete, petroleum, radioactive materials). With others (Solli et al. 2011; Braje 2015), I defend that archaeology has to play a more prominent role in the discussion, but this, for me, means not so much working with the agenda of natural scientists—something that is being done already quite successfully (Edgeworth 2014b)—as reshaping the discussion of the Anthropocene in archaeological terms and with archaeological concepts—instead of those of the natural sciences that have become so exceedingly popular these days. Archaeology can do more than contribute data to a debate that has already been fashioned by geologists and biologists and more recently by historians and philosophers. Witmore (forthcoming a)

suggests that archaeology should confront the fundamental changes in human being of the contemporary era by paying more attention to the “mega-monstrous things that are now pervasive”. It can also document, as I have tried to show, the proliferation of things that has characterised the last hundred years of human life on earth, and the widespread destruction associated to supermodern politics and predatory economies.

The proliferation of mega-artefacts and of things more generally, or the rise of mass destruction, cannot be directly linked to a very specific date—the golden spike sought by Anthropocene researchers. Not to 1781 or 1945. Yet it seems clear, from the archaeological record, that these phenomena became generalised between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century. I have argued that the supermodern did not start exactly in 1914 or 1945, in the same way that modernity did not begin in 1453 or 1492. I have also argued that supermodernity and the non-modern have cohabited and still do in our era. This is something that we tend to forget, often consciously, because anthropologists are afraid of being accused of allochrony, of considering others “primitive”. As if homochrony—unifying temporal experiences under the time of modernity—was a lesser sin (Birth 2008). Archaeology should remember that heterochrony is still the norm in the supermodern era and that ultra-precise golden spikes are of little use to understand many phenomena. Other sciences may learn from the temporality of archaeology.

An archaeological perspective, as I see it, should also stop short of full-fledged post-anthropocentrism, while accepting the fundamentals of its critique. On the one hand, it reinstates the central place of humans in shaping the Anthropocene (Braje 2016), which means that it reminds us of the responsibility of humans—some humans in particular—for the troubles of the present geological era (Ion forthcoming). On the other hand, it refuses to be carried away by a post-anthropocentric rationale that forgets very human phenomena that define our age but cannot be immediately translatable in geological terms: political oppression, gender violence, increasing social inequality, racism, individualism. Flat ontologies run the risk of taking attention away from them (Hodder 2014). All the aforementioned phenomena are political and point toward capitalism and modernity, which sometimes seem lost in post-humanist manifestos. One of the prophets, Timothy Morton (2013), is fascinated by the very specific and tangible drops of sweat on his forehead which are produced by global warming and by the nonlocal, viscous hyperobject that is global warming itself. But he seems less interested in what lies in between—except for hurricanes or storms. This in-between includes derelict factories in the United States, highways and high-speed trains in Japan, burnt-down indigenous villages in Africa and ruined peasant houses in Europe, as well as the political-economy and the ideologies that support or undermine them. This is the scale and these are the material phenomena with which archaeology works best.

Through the debris of the recent past and of the present, then, we tell another story, perhaps not counterintuitive or radically new, but different anyway to that of historians, anthropologists, or geologists. The archaeological record reveals our time as the Age of Destruction, but also as the Age of Excess. Here I have explored three forms of excess: temporal, spatial and material, which are the dimensions that concern the discipline of archaeology more directly. A temporal excess is manifested not only in the well-worn trope of acceleration, but also in the disjointedness of time—a time that only celebrates the present and the future—the pure annihilation of the history of others through genocide, and the cleansing of other temporalities which are at odds with supermodernity. Spatial excess is expressed simultaneously in the material expansion of supermodernity that respects no limits—there is no outside to capitalism, no place left untainted of the



material mark of “progress”—and in the disproportionate limits that have proliferated in our era and that continuously create an inside and an outside—a waste space of empty, marginal places. Finally, as an Age of Extremes (Hobsbawm 1994a), the contemporary era is one of proliferation and deprivation, of unimaginable wealth and abject poverty. It is also an age of monsters, that has witnessed the multiplication of dangerous hybrids, beings of daunting size and deleterious effects on life on earth. The materials of which things are made in supermodernity (plastic, concrete) are as excessive as the things themselves: excessive in their temporal effects, their ecological impact, their perverse hybridity.

Throughout this book, I have tried to explore the manifold faces of the contemporary era: this is a book about supermodernity—the hegemonic regime in the world—but also about the other worlds that have coexisted (some still coexisting) with the supermodern and have resisted (some still resist) in its margins and interstices: those margins that have managed to avoid falling, at least completely, into the traps of hypermodern acceleration, non-placeness, mass consumerism and the impoverishment of experience. These other worlds—its ruins and fragments when they are gone—I have tried to make present: to show both the multiplicity of material worlds that characterise our era and the destructive effects of supermodernity on such worlds.

This perspective is avowedly political, but it is difficult to escape politics when one deals with the present and the recent past. Difficult but not impossible: I have defended that there are themes and perspectives that are more political than others (irrespective of the ideas that guide them) and in any case I do not think that political commitment should be a criterion to judge the quality of archaeological research in the present or in any other period, for that matter. I am much more interested in the political effects of sound archaeology than in the rhetoric of activist science—the possibilities opened up by the discipline when it exhumes a mass grave, maps a guerrilla camp, or studies the spatial syntax of a prison.

In *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot wrote “I will show you fear in a handful of dust.” This is what archaeologists do when they excavate a mass grave, a concentration camp, or a trench. Showing how much fear, suffering and violence there is in a handful of dust should be one of the objectives of the archaeology of the contemporary past—of a critical archaeology that is committed to understanding the iniquities of the present age. But there is another thread that runs throughout this book: hope. For me, it is as important to make injustices visible as it is to show the love and promise of redemption that exists in every shovelful of dirt we dig, in every artefact, building, or landscape destroyed by supermodernity that we study. It is by embracing this messianic time that archaeology can also become a guide to the future.

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